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Freedom and Desire in the *Bhagavad Gītā*

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Freedom and Desire in the *Bhagavad Gītā*

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Freedom and Desire in the *Bhagavad Gītā*

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The *Bhagavad Gītā*, a classical Sanskrit text, describes a spiritual practice called *karma yoga*. Central to this practice is *niṣkāma karman* or action without desire. A number of philosophical issues present themselves in connection with this teaching. First, while the *Gītā* enjoins action, action seems *prima facie* problematic in the *Gītā* in light of metaphysical claims that seem to deny human freedom. Second, Western scholars who hold that desire is necessary for action find the *Gītā*'s desirelessness requirement problematic. Finally, while the sense of *karma yoga* seems clear enough, the teaching is connected with two notions that are obscure: transcendence of the *guṇa*-s and surrender of action to Krishna. This dissertation explores and seeks solutions to these problems.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the *Gītā*'s philosophy and selected classical Indian commentaries. Chapter 2 tackles the assumption by some scholars that the *Gītā* shares tenets of the determinist metaphysics of classical Sāṃkhya. This assumption is shown false and the argument made that the *Gītā*, as a yogic text, implies voluntarism. Chapter 2 offers an analysis of the *Gītā's* concept of *guṇa* (literally 'strand'), and argues that the *puruṣa*, or self, which is called a 'consenter' exercises agency in consenting. Chapter 3 addresses the worry that *niṣkāma karman*, or desireless action, is a contradictory notion because desire is necessary for action.

Based on examination of the *Gītā*'s theory of action, it is shown that the *Gītā* does not hold desire necessary for action and that in fact the text articulates four distinct types of *niṣkāma karman*. Chapter 4 explores the concepts of transcendence of the *guṇa*-s and surrender of action to Krishna and develops a definition of *karma yoga* involving these concepts. The chapter concludes with an argument that *karma yoga* requires creativity. The dissertation closes with the suggestion that through *karma yoga* a practitioner might come to enjoy an extraordinary sort of freedom that surpasses the ability to exercise will.

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Introduction

The *Bhagavad Gītā* (*BG*), or *Song of the Lord*, is probably India's most widely-read religious text. Composed between the 6th and 2nd centuries BCE, it is a small section of the much longer *Mahābhārata* (*MBh*), or *Great Indian Epic*. The *MBh* tells the story of a great war between two clans, the Pandhavas and the Kauravas. The *Gītā* is a dialogue between the charioteer Krishna and the warrior Arjuna which takes place on the battlefield just before the battle begins. In that dialogue, Krishna reveals himself as God incarnate and teaches Arjuna yoga, or spiritual practice. Specifically, he teaches *karma yoga*, a practice of good works. Important to *karma yoga* is what has come to be called *niṣkāma karman* or "action without desire."

Indian tradition considers Krishna a historical figure and the dialogue represented in the *Gītā* a historical event. Out of respect for this tradition, I treat Krishna as the author of the teachings presented in the *Gītā*.

The notion of *niṣkāma karman* seems, *prima facie*, to be at odds with "a dogma in [Western] philosophical psychology:"[1] the Humean theory of motivation. Fundamental to this theory is the tenet that desire is necessary for action.

In keeping with Humeanism, Western scholars of Indian philosophy have seen *niṣkāma karman* as deeply problematic. They have argued that Indian tradition uniformly holds that desire is necessary for action and that so must the *Gītā*. On this basis they put forward what Christopher Framarin calls "subset interpretations" of

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[1] Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995) 93.

niṣkāma karman. Such interpretations assert that not all desires are to be abandoned in *niṣkāma karman*, only a certain subset of them.[2]

However, according to J. N. Mohanty, Indian theories do not exhibit a uniformity of views about action. While several do hold that desire is required for action, Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā, for example, does not.[3] As I will show, neither does the *Gītā*. The subset interpreters of *niṣkāma karman* beg the question when they argue that all Indian philosophies hold desire necessary for action and so must the *Gītā*.

Blinded, perhaps, by Humean dogmatism, these scholars have failed to recognize *niṣkāma karman* as a potential threat to the Humean theory of motivation.

Niṣkāma karman does constitute such a threat, all the more because the *Gītā* explicitly contrasts *niṣkāma karman* with action done from desire and understands the latter much like Hume does. Hume explains that sensory perception induces desire and desire causes action. This proceeds, he thinks, in a mechanistic fashion with no role for will. The *Gītā* explains that perception of sense objects induces desire, and, in the ordinary person, desire seems to override will and force one to act (*BG* 3.36-37).

Niṣkāma karman, on the other hand, involves restraint of desire and the pursuit of ends determined in some other way. But subset interpreters argue that while most desire is to be restrained, certain kinds of desire are allowable under *niṣkāma karman,* such as desire for liberation or non-selfish desires, and serve as sources of motivation.

I will argue that desire is not necessary for action according to the *Gītā* and that the *karma yoga* practitioner should not allow desire any role in his actions.

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[2] Christopher G. Framarin, "The Desires You Are Required to Get Rid of: A Functionalist Analysis of Desire in the *Bhagavadgītā*," *Philosophy East and West* 56 (2006): 605.

[3] J. N. Mohanty, *Classical Indian Philosophy* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000) 105-06.

Though it may be present, the practitioner should exercise restraint and not allow desire to motivate him.

In Chapter 1, I provide a brief philosophical introduction to the *Gītā*. The purpose of the chapter is to elucidate the *Gītā*'s metaphysics, psychology, and ethics as relevant to my project.

My account of *niṣkāma karman* depends on the agent possessing genuine freedom. This is problematic, for the text includes several verses that *prima facie* seem to deny freedom, such as the following.

> Actions are performed, in all cases,
> by the *guṇa*-s of *prakṛti*;
> one who is deceived by self-conceit
> thinks 'I am the doer'.[4] (*BG* 3.27)

A longstanding trend in *Gītā* scholarship is to assume that the *guṇa*-s of the *Gītā* are to be understood in line with the school of classical Sāṃkhya. Sāṃkhya takes the *guṇa*-s to be the fundamental constituents of material nature which produce all phenomena according to strict causal laws. Commentators and scholars attribute this view to Krishna and, based on verses like *BG* 3.27, argue that Krishna is a determinist.

I begin Chapter 2 by arguing that the *Gītā*, as a yogic text, implies voluntarism. I go on to review arguments that Krishna is a determinist, and then engage in a careful analysis of Krishna's use of the concept of *guṇa*. It is not difficult to show that the *guṇa*-s are not material constituents according to the *Gītā*. They are discussed at length in Chapters 14, 17, and 18 of the *Gītā* in connection with cognitive, affective, desiderative, and experiential states, behavior, virtues, and vices. No verse in the *Gītā* positively ties the *guṇa*-s to a determinist metaphysics. I argue that *guṇa* theory is a theory of psychology which is compatible with voluntarism.

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[4] All translations of verses of the *Gītā* are my own, unless otherwise noted.

Krishna is explicit in stating that an agent is necessary for action, but he provides no theoretical account of agency. In Chapter 2, I develop a theory of agency and motivation that is consistent with, and indeed suggested by, the broader metaphysics of the *Gītā*.

In Chapter 3, I entertain the views of subset interpreters and argue that they are incompatible with important elements of the text. I show that Krishna explicitly differentiates three types of action according to the reasons for which they are performed. One is action performed from a sense of duty, the second is action performed from desire, and the third is action performed from delusion. The first and third are not motivated by desire. This is made very clear in the text. Therefore, they count as *niṣkāma karman*, and *niṣkāma karman* is to be understood as action in which desire plays no role. Krishna states that he acts too, and that he is motivated by neither duty, desire, nor delusion. His action counts as a third type of *niṣkāma karman*, which will be explained.

In Chapter 3, I also address the question of what motivates a practitioner to take up and maintain *karma yoga* practice. Throughout the text Krishna promises Arjuna that successful yoga practice culminates in liberation, or freedom from rebirth, a state characterized by bliss. It seems, on the one hand, that this promise is supposed to motivate Arjuna to practice. On the other hand, it seems that desire for liberation is not an allowable motivation under the *karma yoga* instructions. (This is a puzzle occurring in all enlightenment traditions, Buddhist as well as Hindu.) I show that as Krishna seems to understand it, desire is intentional and only takes as its objects external and internal phenomena expected to cause pleasure. I argue that liberation is not a phenomenon, and therefore cannot be an object of desire. The notion of desire for liberation is therefore incoherent. I suggest that the motivation for yoga practice might be the taste of self-knowledge the student gets from exposure to Krishna's teachings.

Finally, in Chapter 4 I argue that the action constitutive of *karma yoga* is *nirguṇa karman*, or action without involvement of the *guṇa*-s. I define *nirguṇa karman* negatively as action by one who has transcended the *guṇa*-s, and positively as surrendering all action to God.

Note that I translate the Sanskrit words *īśvara* and *brahman* as 'God'. I have chosen to use 'God' because the concept of the divine being developed in the *Gītā* is close enough to a Christian notion of God that comparison by the reader is probably inevitable. The risk in using 'God', of course, is that it carries Christian connotations which may unduly color our reading of the text. On the other hand, it may force the reader new to the *Gītā* to countenance cross-traditional differences as he finds a familiar term employed in unfamiliar ways. I hope for the latter.

Krishna identifies himself as God, describes his nature as God, and instructs the practitioner to worship him as God. Yet, Krishna, as an incarnation of God, will someday die. For clarity, I use 'God' to refer to the creator and sustainer of the universe (*īśvara*) who is at the same time the absolute being (*brahman*). I let 'Krishna' refer to the incarnation of God who is the teacher in the *Gītā*.

The notions of transcendence of the *guṇa*-s and surrendering action to God occur in critical places but nonetheless infrequently in Krishna's teachings. They have received scant attention from classical Indian commentators and almost no attention from Western *Gītā* scholars. The classical commentators, for the most part, interpret these notions to accord with the determinism they think is implicit in the *Gītā*'s philosophy. They take both the ideas of transcendence of the *guṇa*-s and surrendering action to God to be disidentification with one's actions or the recognition that one's actions are not one's own doing. I disagree and give a libertarian interpretation. I argue that to transcend the *guṇa*-s is to refrain from acting for any of one's own reasons such as duty, desire, or delusion, and to instead adopt God's ends as one's own. I show that transcending the *guṇa*-s and surrendering action to God require

constant devotion to God. Finally, I argue that the *nirguṇa karman* practitioner does not submit his will to God. Rather, he chooses to take up God's ends. These ends are construed broadly. I argue that there is room for choice and creativity in achieving these ends, and that in some cases choice and creativity are required.

The four main questions of this dissertation on the *Gītā* are:

1. Is effort considered in principle possible?
2. Is action in *karma yoga* to be free of all desire? If so, how can action be performed without desire?
3. How is action in *karma yoga* to be specifically characterized?
4. What does it mean to transcend the *guṇa*-s and surrender action to God?

For each issue I address I consider the positions taken by classical Indian commentators as available. Hundreds of commentaries exist and I cannot consider them all. I include what are perhaps the two most prominent: that of the non-dualist Śaṅkara (8th century CE), whose commentary is the oldest extant, and that of the qualified non-dualist Rāmānuja (12th century CE). I also include the tantric Abhinavagupta (11th century CE), a voluntarist and sophisticated thinker, and Aurobindo (early 20th century CE), whose work is one of the more sensitive commentaries of the modern era.

There are limits, it must be noted, to the use of the commentators' work in understanding the *Gītā*. Svāmī Ādidevānanda, in the preface to his translation of Rāmānuja's *Gītā* commentary, writes:

> Every Vedāntic *ācārya* [teacher] has to justify his claim to that position by writing commentaries or *bhāṣya*-s on the three foundational texts of the Vedānta: the Upanishads, the *Vedāntasūtra*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

> Ever since the time of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya this convention has been in vogue.[5]

In these commentaries a proponent of a school of thought interprets the *Gītā* according to his own system, often explaining away verses he cannot handle as meant for those not capable of grasping higher truths. A commentator may also simply neglect to comment on a verse that directly challenges his view. For example, Śaṅkara does this with *BG* 3.22 where Krishna says he engages in action. That Krishna is inactive is fundamental to Śaṅkara's view.[6]

In Chapters 2 through 4, I consider the views of other modern Western scholars, namely George Teschner, Simon Brodbeck, Matthew McKenzie, Roy Perrett, Tara Chatterjea, Purushottama Bilimoria, and Christopher Framarin. Their work constitutes the current research on free will and *niṣkāma karman* in the *Gītā*.

I make use of terms, concepts, and distinctions developed by contemporary Western action theorists to help clarify my reading. This places the *Gītā*'s action theory in a context familiar to the Western philosophic reader and thereby makes it more accessible. There is only a limited extent to which the *Gītā*'s theories can be brought into dialogue with Western theories, however. There are a great many issues of interest to Western action theorists about which Krishna simply does not worry.

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[5] Śrī Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya*, trans. Svāmī Adidevānanda (Mylapore: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1991) 9.

[6] Modern Western *Gītā* scholars such as Franklin Edgerton, J. A. B. van Buitenen, Eliot Deutsch, and others examine the *Gītā*'s metaphysics, soteriology, and so on. Their work is helpful because they set their own theoretical commitments aside, for the most part, and let the text speak for itself. However, their treatments tend to be summary, capturing only general features of the text. Their work informs the overview of the *Gītā* I provide in Chapter 1 but it less helpful later in the dissertation when I engage in detailed analysis.

Reading the* Gītā *as a yogic text

Krishna's main concern in the *Gītā* is to teach yoga. The theories he offers are meant to support his practical teachings. Yoga works on the whole person but involves, importantly, conscious intervention in psychological processes and transformation of the inner landscape. It is therefore necessary that Krishna provide not only a theoretical account of how things are but that he also describe how things seem to the practitioner at different stages of the yogic path.

As Radhakrishnan puts it, Krishna employs two modes of speech, the subjective and objective.[7] In the subjective mode he gives a phenomenological account of a state or practice. In the objective mode he gives psychological and/or metaphysical accounts.

Sometimes it is not clear which mode is being employed. For example, liberation is described as blissful (*BG* 5.21, 5.24, 6.21, 6.27) and this is clearly phenomenological. It is described as a state of release from the bondage of *karman* that leads to rebirth (*BG* 3.31, 9.28) and this is metaphysical/psychological. It is also frequently described as "going to Krishna" or some equivalent thereof (*BG* 4.9, 7.23, 8.5-8, 9.25, 10.10, 11.55). It is not clear what mode is employed in such descriptions. It is not clear what "going to Krishna" might mean and the text does not elaborate on this notion.

Rāmānuja takes the phrase to refer figuratively to escaping from the process of rebirth.[8] Thus, he takes it as a stand-in for the metaphysical account of liberation

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[7] S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. 2, 2nd ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1931) 533.

[8] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 263.

given elsewhere. In doing so, he ignores any content that it might add to his understanding of liberation. An interpreter sensitive to the subjective mode will consider that "going to Krishna" might just mean feeling close to God. Taken as phenomenological, the description adds something to our understanding of liberation. It provides an important indicator for the practitioner. He will know he is liberated when, among other things, he has an abiding feeling of being close to God.

A third mode of speech Krishna employs is the practical. This is exemplified by many statements to Arjuna in the imperative tense. Krishna commands Arjuna not to grieve, to fight, to give up desire, and so on. But the practical mode is also used more subtly. For example, consider the following verse.

> 'I do nothing whatsoever,'
> the disciplined one who thinks this,
> though seeing, hearing, touching, smelling,
> eating, walking, sleeping, or breathing, knows the truth.
> (*BG* 5.8)

While many interpreters have taken this verse as evidence of the view that the self is inherently passive,[9] I read it as telling the practitioner to think 'I do nothing' not because that is true but because adopting this thought will have some effect on his mental state. The instruction may be purely pragmatic.

Each of these three modes of speech is indispensable to Krishna as a yoga teacher. In interpreting the *Gītā* it is necessary to consider which mode is being employed.

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[9] Robert Minor, *Bhagavad-Gītā: An Exegetical Commentary* (New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1982) 191; Rāmājuna, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 195-96; Śrī Śaṅkarācarya, *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Alladi Mahadeva Sastri (Madras: Samata Books, 1995) 164.

Chapter 1

In this chapter I lay the groundwork for my project. I provide a brief discussion of the *Gītā*'s storyline, define 'yoga', and address the traditional view that the *Gītā* teaches three distinct yogic paths. I argue that Arjuna is to be viewed as a new practitioner. I provide a concise overview of the *Gītā*'s metaphysics, psychology, and ethics. Finally, I summarize the views of the Indian commentators Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Abhinavagupta, and Aurobindo as relevant to their work on the *Gītā*.

The Gītā*'s storyline*

Conflict over control of a kingdom sets the stage for the *Gītā*. A group of brothers, the Pandhavas, have lost their portion of a kingdom to their cousins the Kauravas in a crooked game of dice. The Pandhavas, abiding by the terms of the bet, have been exiled for thirteen years. At the end of this time their rule was to be restored. However, when they return the Kauravas deny them their due and both sides prepare for battle.

The *Gītā* opens with vivid descriptions of the two armies arrayed against each other on opposite sides of the battlefield of Kurukṣetra. Arjuna, one of the Pandhava brothers, instructs his charioteer Krishna to draw their chariot between the two armies so he can survey the scene. Arjuna is overwhelmed at the sight and though he is a great warrior, he loses his resolve.

> Arjuna saw fathers standing there,

then grandfathers,
teachers, uncles, brothers,
sons, grandsons, friends, (*BG* 1.26)
and beloved father-in-laws,
but members of two armies.
Arjuna, seeing
all his kinsmen lined up, (*BG* 1.27)
was filled with great tenderness
and came to grief. He said:
'Seeing this, O Krishna,
my kin approaching, wishing to fight, (*BG* 1.28)
my limbs sink
and my mouth dries up.
My body trembles
and my hair bristles. (*BG* 1.29)
The Gāṇdiva bow slips from my hand
and my skin burns.
I cannot stand
and my mind seems to reel'. (*BG* 1.30)

Arjuna slumps down in his chariot and refuses to fight.

Arjuna explains that he does not want to kill his kin (*BG* 1.35). The Pandhava brothers were raised alongside their Kaurava cousins. Arjuna loves them like brothers despite their infidelity.

Furthermore, Arjuna argues, it is wrong to destroy one's family. Though his cousins are blinded by greed and do not recognize this, Arjuna claims he knows what is morally required in the situation.

While Arjuna's speech seems to indicate that he knows what he wants and ought to do, his behavior reveals inner conflict. He drops his weapon and slumps down in his chariot, unmoving. If his only wish was to avoid harming his family, and/or if he was sure that killing his cousins was wrong in this situation, he would take steps to stay the battle. But Arjuna does nothing. He does not leave, nor does he try to convince the others to lay down their weapons.

He is arrested, I suspect, by conflicting desires and moral dilemma. He does not leave the battlefield, perhaps, because as much as he wants to spare his cousins he also wants to regain his kingdom. He may not try to stay the battle because while it is wrong to kill family members, the circumstances of the current conflict make it a just war. It is his duty as a warrior to enter such a fight (*BG* 2.31). Arjuna cannot fulfill his duty to his family (his *kuladharma*) without violating his duty as a warrior (his *varṇadharma*), and vice versa. Thus he is faced with a moral dilemma.

J. N. Mohanty thinks that the duty of non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), which is prescribed to everyone at all times by eternal duty (*sanātanadharma*), further weights one horn of Arjuna's dilemma.[1] But Arjuna does not object to killing *per se*, just to killing his family members.[2] The duty of non-violence plays no role in his deliberations. In fact, the former plays little role in the *Gītā*. It appears, only once, in a list of virtues (*BG* 16.2) but receives no discussion. Though it would seem to conflict with his duty to fight, no such conflict is recognized and the text seems to treat the duty of non-violence as irrelevant to Arjuna's dilemma. We should take it that

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[1] J. N. Mohanty, *Classical Indian Philosophy* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000) 108.

[2] Peter Della Santina, "Conceptions of Dharma in the Śramaṇical and Brāhmaṇical Traditions: Buddhism and the Mahābhārata," *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata*, ed. Bimal Krishna Matilal (Delhi: Indian Association of Advanced Study in association with Motilal Banarsidass, 1989) 106.

way. Even Gandhi, who champions non-violence and would likely make a case for its role in the *Gītā* if he could, agrees with this reading of the text.[3]

Krishna responds to Arjuna's crisis with a lengthy discourse in which he reveals himself as God incarnate, imparts wisdom, and teaches yoga as a means of liberation (*mokṣa*). He encourages Arjuna to take up yoga, seek liberation, and fight the battle as part of his practice. This discourse constitutes Chapters 2 though 18 of the *Gītā*.

Definition of 'yoga'

'Yoga' is a noun derived from the verbal root *yuj*, which means 'to yoke'.[4] As used in the Vedas (12th-9th centuries BCE), the oldest texts of Indo-European literature, 'yoga' refers to the yoke that connects beasts of burden to each other or to a wagon.[5] In the *Katha Upaniṣad* (*KU*; 6th-5th centuries BCE), the meditative practice of sensory restraint is likened to a chariot driver's control of his horses and called 'yoga' (*KU* 2.3.11). From here on, 'yoga' comes to be used to refer to practices such as meditation, breathing exercises (*prāṇāyāma*), physical postures (*āsana*), asceticism, prayer, contemplation of wisdom teachings, and selfless action. Mircea Eliade understands yoga, in a general sense, as "a pan-Indian corpus of

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[3] M. K. Gandhi, *The Bhagavadgita* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 2001) 17.

[4] Arthur Anthony Macdonell, *A Practical Sanskrit Dictionary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004) 245.

[5] Ian Whicher, *The Integrity of the Yoga Darśana* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998) 7.

spiritual techniques."[6] However, not all yoga practitioners have spiritual aims. Some do yoga for their physical and/or mental health, for example. What is common to all yoga is that it has some sort of positive transformative effect on the practitioner. Modifying Eliade's definition, yoga can be defined, broadly, as a pan-Indian corpus of self-transformational techniques.

Jñāna yoga, *karma yoga*, and *bhakti yoga*

Most commentators and interpreters of the *Gītā* take it to teach three yogic paths: *jñāna yoga*, or yoga of wisdom, a practice of contemplation and meditation; *karma yoga*, or yoga of works, a practice of selfless service; and *bhakti yoga*, or yoga of devotion, a practice of worship.[7]

Jñāna yoga (yoga of wisdom) appears in *BG* 3.3 as *jñāna yoga sāṃkyānām* or *jñāna yoga* of the Sāṃkhyas. Krishna refers more frequently to *sāṃkhya yoga* than to *jñāna yoga*, but the sense of both is the same. They refer to the practice of contemplating the true nature of the self which Krishna introduces in Chapter 2 as an antidote to Arjuna's despair at the thought of killing his cousins.

> You mourn what should not be mourned
> [yet] you speak words of wisdom.
> Those who are [truly] wise
> mourn neither the living nor the dead. (*BG* 2.11)

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[6] Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) 359.

[7] "Bhagavadgītā," *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 2, 1987 ed.; S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1929) 554.

Never have I not existed,
nor you, nor those rulers of men.
Nor is it the case that
we will ever not exist. (*BG* 2.12)
Youth, adolescence, and old age
[occur] in the body of the embodied one,
on this matter the wise
are not confused. (*BG* 2.13)
As a man, leaving old garments,
takes other new ones,
so the embodied one, leaving worn out bodies,
joins with other ones. (*BG* 2.22)

As defined in the commentarial tradition, contemplation of philosophical truths and sustained examination of the direct experience of selfhood are the essence of *jñāna yoga*. The goal of the practice is equanimity.

BG 3.8-9 provides a definition of *karma yoga* (yoga of works).

Perform enjoined action!
Action is indeed better than inaction.
Moreover, the maintenance of your body
cannot be achieved through inaction. (*BG* 3.8)
Except for action for the sake of sacrifice,
this world is bound by action.
Perform action for that purpose, O Arjuna,
free from attachment. (*BG* 3.9)

Karma yoga is the practice of doing one's duty, free from desire, as an offering to God.

Krishna emphasizes that the *karma yoga* practitioner should be free from attachment to the *phala*, or fruit, of action (*BG* 2.51, 4.20, 5.12, 6.40, and elsewhere). The question of what is meant by 'fruit of action' warrants some attention. It is consistent with most passages to take the fruit of action to be either the direct result of action, such as winning the war, or to take it to be the pleasure or pain occasioned by experience of the direct result of action.

Mohanty contends that the fruit is the pleasure arising from the direct result of action.[8] He reasons that if the fruit were the outcome, then the instruction to abandon the fruit of action would amount to the injunction of aimlessness, and Krishna would have to be understood as advising Arjuna to fight the war without trying to win. But since Krishna does seem to imply that Arjuna should try to win, Mohanty concludes that what is to be abandoned is not the aim of winning but any pleasure Arjuna hopes to derive from winning. Thus, he argues, the fruit of action is properly understood as pleasure or pain experienced due to the result of action, such as Arjuna's happiness at winning the war.

I disagree. *BG* 2.43 states that rebirth is a fruit of action. Here *phala* (fruit) is used in the sense of a result of action that might be the basis for pleasure or pain but which itself is neither pleasure nor pain. Note that in *BG* 2.43 the *phala* is not the direct result of action but an indirect one. *Phala* is used again in the sense of a result other than pleasure or pain in *BG* 14.16, which states that the fruit of one type of action is ignorance. However, that verse also states that the fruit of another type of action is pain. *Phala* is used loosely in the *Gītā*. We should understand the fruit of action as any result of action, direct or indirect, external (such as the state of affairs of the war being won) or internal (such as the variety of pleasurable and painful feelings Arjuna may feel upon winning the war).

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[8] Mohanty, *Classical Indian Philosophy* 118.

Finally, to return to the three yogas identified by commentators, *bhakti yoga* (yoga of devotion) is not defined by Krishna, but he uses the term in the following passage in Chapter 12.

> But those who hold me as supreme,
> surrendering all actions to me,
> meditating on me,
> worship me with undistracted *bhakti yoga*. (*BG* 12.6)
> I soon deliver
> from the sea of death and transmigration,
> those who enter into me
> in contemplation. (*BG* 12.7)

Bhakti yoga enjoys rich and extensive discussion in Indian sacred literature subsequent the *Gītā*, but mention of it in the *Gītā* is scant.

There are a range of views on the relationships of these three paths. Śaṅkara argues that *jñāna yoga* is the only path that leads to liberation; *karma yoga* and *bhakti yoga* have their uses but do not lead to the final goal.[9] Rāmānuja exalts *bhakti yoga* and takes *jñāna yoga* and *karma yoga* as preliminaries.[10] J. A. van Buitenen holds that *karma yoga* is primary and *jñāna yoga* and *bhakti yoga* subsidiary to it.[11] Robert

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[9] Śrī Śaṅkarācārya, *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Alladi Mahadeva Sastri (Madras: Samata Books, 1995) 22-28.

[10] Śrī Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya*, trans. Svāmī Adidevānanda (Mylapore: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1991) 116, 124.

[11] J. A. B. van Buitenen, *The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahābhārata* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 22.

Minor argues that the three are elements of a single path he calls Gītāyoga.[12]

I also hold that Krishna teaches but a single path. Krishna, at first, calls *jñāna yoga* and *karma yoga* two distinct practices (*BG* 3.3). He associates *jñāna yoga* with ascetic abandonment of action, argues that such abandonment of action is impossible (*BG* 3.5), and therefore finds *karma yoga* the superior practice (*BG* 3.4-7).

Later Krishna argues that the two are really one because both paths lead to liberation (*BG* 5.4-5). However, having the same end is not sufficient for identity, and Krishna implicitly recognizes this. After making this argument, he goes on to talk about *jñāna yoga* and *karma yoga* as distinct.

He argues that the renunciation of action required in *jñāna yoga* is difficult to attain, and that the same effect can be achieved more quickly and easily through renunciation of desire in action. He recommends *karma yoga* to *jñāna yoga* practitioners (*BG* 5.6-12). He implies that it is possible to practice *jñāna yoga* without practicing *karma yoga*, and this shows he recognizes the two as distinct.

Based on this passage, it seems wrong to say that Krishna teaches both *jñāna yoga* and *karma yoga*. He discusses the first but without recommending it. In fact, he discourages the would-be *jñāna yoga* practitioner, saying that by itself the path is difficult and lengthy. On the other hand, he both describes and recommends *karma yoga*, and his recommendation goes out to Arjuna, who has not yet committed to a path, and to *jñāna yoga* practitioners who already have. Everyone, it seems implied, should choose *karma yoga*.

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[12] Robert Minor, "The Gita's Way as the Only Way," *Philosophy East and West* 30.3 (1980): 340. Minor argues that contemplation, renunciation of desire in action, and devotion, as taught in the *Gītā*, are mutually involved, mutually supporting, and all elements of a single path is calls Gītāyoga. Krishna, he argues, teaches this one path. While I agree with his analysis of the inter-involvement of *jñāna*, *karman*, and *bhakti*, I dislike the term 'Gītāyoga'. It is unnecessary to introduce a term never used in the text itself.

This is not to say that Krishna discusses *jñāna yoga* merely to contrast it to *karma yoga* and indicate to Arjuna what he should not choose. Rather, Krishna recognizes the practical value of what lies at the heart of *jñāna yoga*: contemplation of the true nature of the self (*BG* 2.11-30). Krishna teaches the latter, both describing for Arjuna the true nature of the self and encouraging him to reflect on this truth before introducing *karma yoga*. By means of a transition from one to the other he says:

> But hear this! That insight of [*jñāna*] *yoga*
> is declared to you.
> Disciplined by such insight, O Arjuna,
> you will leave off the bondage of action. (*BG* 2.39)

He is explicit that this element of *jñāna yoga* should be practiced as a part of *karma yoga*. So while Krishna incorporates *jñāna yoga* into his teaching, it is wrong to claim that he teaches both *jñāna yoga* and *karma yoga* as distinct paths. He only teaches *karma yoga*.

Krishna never calls *bhakti yoga* a distinct path nor submits it to comparison with the other two. But he teaches Arjuna devotion as he teaches him *karma yoga* (*BG* 3.30, 4.10-11, 5.29, for example). There is little reason to think that Krishna considers *bhakti yoga* a special path of yoga.[13]

Most often Krishna simply urges Arjuna to practice yoga without naming a path. The best way to characterize the yoga taught in the *Gītā* is as *karma yoga* which involves, along with the discipline of selfless action, contemplation of the nature of the self and a strong devotional element. I discuss the nature of *karma yoga* in more depth in Chapter 4.

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[13] The fact that many classical commentators do may be attributed to the rise of the *bhakti* movement which followed, and may have been a response to, the *Gītā*.

Arjuna as the new practitioner

Arjuna, as the recipient of the *karma yoga* teachings, represents the new *yogin*, or practitioner. He is fit to receive yoga teachings but as of yet has no yogic accomplishments. First, he does not yet know the true nature of the self.

> You mourn what should not be mourned
> [yet] you speak words of wisdom.
> Those who are [truly] wise
> mourn neither the living nor the dead. (*BG* 2.11)

Krishna's teaching on the nature of the self is meant to correct this. Second, Arjuna lets desire keep him from his duty.

> I do not want to kill them
> though they would kill [me], O Krishna,
> not for rule over all three worlds.
> How much less for this earth? (*BG* 1.35)

Finally, when the *Gītā* opens, Arjuna does not know Krishna as God. Krishna reveals his true nature to Arjuna (*BG* 4.5-8, 7.1-17, 9.7-10, 9.17-19, 10.20-42, 11.5-34) and teaches him to be a devotee and offer his actions to God.

The Gītā*'s metaphysics*

The *Gītā*'s metaphysics is not as systematic as the modern philosopher may like. It is rich in its elaboration of the nature of the self (*ātman* or *puruṣa*),[14] God, and their relationship while largely ignoring other issues.

The self is described as imperceptible, unchanging, immeasurable, and eternal (*BG* 2.11-25). It may inhabit a body. When it does, upon death of the body it may take up a new body just as one may discard an old garment and put on a new one (*BG* 2.22).

The self is also described as all-pervasive (*BG* 2.17, 24). So, the self is the same, in some sense, in all beings. This view echoes the upanishadic identity of the self of a human individual and Brahman, or the absolute. The *Gītā* is strongly influenced by the Upanishads, showing this influence in shared views and verses that are borrowed almost word-for-word.[15] However, while the *Gītā* employs many inherited concepts, it often reinterprets them.[16] Care is therefore required to understand the *Gītā*'s notion of the self.

BG 13.22-24 implies that there are two selves in an individual.

> Observer and consenter,
> preserver, possessor, great Lord,
> and supreme self, thus is it called,
> the great person dwelling in this body. (*BG* 13.22)
> Some see the self in the self

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[14] The terms *ātman*, often translated "self" and *puruṣa*, often translated "conscious being" are used interchangeably in the *Gītā* to refer to the human self.

[15] Franklin Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, Harvard Oriental Series vol. 38-39 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994) 6; Radhakrishnan 525.

[16] Robert Minor, *Bhagavad-Gītā: An Exegetical Commentary* (New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1982) 339.

through meditation,
others through [*jñāna*] *yoga*,
but the best through *karma yoga*. (*BG* 13.24)

Reference to the supreme self in *BG* 13.22 implies that there is a higher and a lower self. That *BG* 13.24 calls the to-be-perceived self 'the self in the self' implies that the higher self is interior to the lower one. The idea that every person has two selves, one ordinary and one divine, is fundamental to the yoga teachings of the Upanishads. But while *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 3.1.1-2, for example, takes the two selves to be distinct like two birds, the *Gītā* sees a closer relationship. It acknowledges just one self which can partake of two modes. The higher self is the self in its inherent nature. The lower self is the self *qua* individual. Individuality depends on embodiment and a sense of individuality (*ahaṃkṛta bhāva*) (*BG* 18.17). The latter is generated by the ego-sense (*ahaṃkāra*), a factor of normal human psychology (*BG* 3.27).

The lower, or individual, self is conditioned and impermanent while the higher, or inner, self is imperceptible, unchanging, immeasurable, and eternal. It is the witness, consenter, supporter, and experiencer.

In Chapter 2, I argue that Krishna should be taken to hold that agency belongs inherently to the self. His view, I think, is that agency belongs to the higher self, while it is exercised by the self *qua* individual.

There is a third self beyond the higher and lower selves of the individual (*BG* 15.16-18). That self is the supreme self (*puruṣottama*), or God. Krishna explains that he, as God, supports the two lower selves (*BG* 15.17). God endows the bodies and minds of living beings with energy (*ojas*) and I suggest in Chapter 3 that this is how he supports lower or individual selves. His support of the inner self is immediate. The inner self is a fragment (*aṃśa*) of God (*BG* 10.41, 15.7-8).

At the same time, the individual selves and their higher selves are called God's two *prakṛti*-s, or natures. His lower nature (*aparā prakṛti*) is eightfold, consisting of

the material elements earth, water, fire, wind, and ether, and the mental factors of *ahaṃkāra* (ego sense), *buddhi* (judgment), and *manas* (mind) (*BG* 7.4). His higher nature (*parā prakṛti*) consists of inner selves (*BG* 7.5).

The *Gītā* does not define *prakṛti* and many interpreters have assumed it to have the same sense in the *Gītā* as it does in classical Sāṃkhya. In Chapter 2 I argue that this is wrong and that person's *prakṛti* is her 'nature' in the sense of her physiological and psychological make-up.

Prakṛti always belongs to a self. For the human being, the body and mind are the higher self's *prakṛti*. The world, all living beings in it, and their inner selves are God's *prakṛti*. His relationship to them can be understood as analogous to the relationship of a human being's inner self to his body and mind but only to an extent.

God's relationship to the world is much more complex than the relationship of a self to a human body. God is the origin of the world (*BG* 7.7). He creates by emanating it from himself (*BG* 9.7-10). He maintains the world's existence for a time (*BG* 9.17-19, 10.39) then dissolves it back into himself to later emanate it anew (*BG* 7.7). This process of emanation and dissolution is cyclic and eternal.

God is the inner self of every being (individuals' higher selves are fragments of God) and the essence of every thing (*BG* 7.8-11). He is also the source of the manifold conditions of living beings such as becoming and passing away, pain and pleasure, fear and fearlessness, fame and disrepute (*BG* 10.4-5). He is time, the condition of change (*BG* 11.32).

God is the best of every category of things (*BG* 10.21-38).

God is greater than the world he creates and maintains. Krishna explains "I support this world with a single fragment of myself" (*BG* 10.42) and when he reveals his true form Arjuna sees that the universe is fully contained in Krishna's body (*BG* 11.13). There is a one-way dependency relation between the world and God.

> This whole world is emanated by me

in my unmanifest aspect.
All beings abide in me;
I do not abide in them. (*BG* 9.4)
And yet beings do not abide in me.
Behold my majestic power!
Sustaining beings yet not abiding in them,
my self is creature-manifesting. (*BG* 9.5)

While the world is a self-manifestation of God (*BG* 10.19), he also transcends it in having several unmanifest aspects. One is as space.

Just as the great wind which goes everywhere
abides in the eternal ether,
so do all beings
abide in me. Reflect on this. (*BG* 9.6)

In another unmanifest aspect, God generates all manifestation (*BG* 8.18). In a further unmanifest aspect, God is birthless and imperishable. To know him thus is the ultimate goal of yoga (*BG* 8.20-21).

It is said to be unmanifest and imperishable.
They call it the highest goal
having attained which, they are not born again.
It is my supreme abode. (*BG* 8.21)

God's highest unmanifest aspect is called *brahman* (*BG* 7.29, 8.3). When *brahman* is so used it borrows its sense from the Upanishads where Brahman is the absolute, the world ground, the unity underlying all diverse phenomena.

The Gītā*'s psychology*

The *Gītā* gives a good deal of attention to psychology. In this section I discuss the faculties of *ahaṃkāra* (ego sense), *buddhi* (judgment), *manas* (mind), and perceptual senses with are basic to its psychology. And I introduce the *Gītā*'s two theories of personality and behavior.

As I said earlier, the *ahaṃkāra* is merely the sense of being an individual. It appears rarely in the *Gītā* and little more need be said about it here.

The *buddhi* is the highest psychological faculty (*BG* 3.42) in the sense that it has the power to control and direct the lower ones, namely the senses and mind. It seems to be understood in two senses. Early in the text it is depicted as a faculty which formulates intentions to act (*BG* 2.41). It can be disciplined to formulate virtuous intentions. When the *buddhi* remains undisciplined it generates a plethora of selfish intentions, one, perhaps, for each desirable object encountered by the perceptual senses (*BG* 2.41).

Later in the text the *buddhi* appears as the faculty of moral judgment by which one knows truth from falsity, right from wrong, and what is to be feared from what need not be feared (*BG* 18.30). In an undisciplined person with a desirous nature the *buddhi* fails to correctly discern one's moral obligations (*BG* 18.31).

The "ten and one senses" are mentioned but never listed in the *Gītā*. All commentators take them to be the five perceptual senses (sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell), the five faculties of action (speech, grasping, walking, reproduction, and secretion), and the *manas* (mind). These eleven senses are first listed in the *Praśna Upaniṣad* 4.2 and are later adopted by most post-upanishadic thinkers as part of a commonly accepted psychology.[17]

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[17] N. Ross Reat, *The Origins of Indian Psychology* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1990) 230.

Krishna seems to see the perceptual senses as faculties which actively reach out to objects, rather than passively receiving information. Such a conception may have been common in the era of, and preceding, the *Gītā*'s composition. *Maitri Upaniṣad* 6.31 describes rays that reach out from the sense organs and grasp objects.

In the commonly accepted view, the *manas* is a *sensus communis* which takes sensory input from the perceptual senses and builds from this input coherent perception.[18] It is not clear that Krishna takes the *manas* this way. He does not describe the *manas* but seems to assume his listener is familiar with the term.

Where he mentions the *manas*, he most often simply instructs Arjuna to control it (*BG* 6.14). He associates control of the *manas* with mental equanimity, tranquility, and single-pointedness of focus. He uses the terms *cetas* and *citta* in the same way (*BG* 6.10, 12, 14, 23). These two are often translated as 'mind' or 'thoughts', as is *manas*.

An additional aspect of the *manas* is revealed by several passages that indicate that the *manas* can be used to control the senses (*BG* 3.7, 3.42, 6.24). Such control is required for *karma yoga* so that one can focus on one's duty without being distracted by objects of desire. Meditation requires complete restraint of sensory activity.

While the *manas* can limit and even completely cut off sensory input, Krishna warns that it is liable to wander, enticed by memories of objects of the senses (*BG* 3.6). From this we see that the *manas* includes the faculty of memory and reflection. As we saw earlier, the *buddhi* can be used to control the *manas*.

The functions of the *buddhi* (as a faculty of intention), *manas*, and ten other senses are illustrated in *KU* 1.3.3-4. There the self is likened to the passenger of a chariot, the *buddhi* to the charioteer, the *manas* to the bridle, the perceptual and

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[18]Reat, *Origins of Indian Psychology* 242-43.

volitional senses to the horses, the body to the chariot, and sense objects to the road. Like horses, the senses are active and appetitive.

The *Gītā* seems to agree with this view of the senses and makes much of the connection between the senses and desire. I discuss this further in Chapter 3. When undisciplined, the senses pull a person this way and that like unruly horses pull on a chariot. The *manas* conveys the activities of the senses to the *buddhi* and also serves as a instrument by which the *buddhi* can control the activities of the senses. A disciplined *buddhi* knows what ends ought to be pursued, and controls the senses accordingly, like a disciplined charioteer controls his horses. An undisciplined *buddhi* lets the senses run amok. Implied in the simile is the relationship of the self to the *buddhi*. Just as the lord of the chariot commands his driver who is under contract to serve him, the self controls the *buddhi*.

Where human *prakṛti* is detailed in the *Gītā* its constituents are listed along with its modifications (*savikāra*): desire, aversion, pleasure, and pain (*BG* 13.6). These are modifications of a person's nature in the sense that they are temporary psychological states that arise in a person under certain conditions.

The *Gītā* devotes much theoretical attention to what might be called the science of personality and behavior. In Chapter 16, it describes, in detail, two types of beings, the divine and the demonic. Those of the divine type possess such good qualities as self-restraint, non-violence, veracity, and compassion (*BG* 16.1-3). The demonic are arrogant, cruel, desirous, and unjust (*BG* 16.4-18). Typical activities are also described. The divine type tend to persevere in yoga, recite scriptures, and engage in acts of generosity (*BG* 16.1-3) while the demonic type make gratification their aim in action, seek wealth through unjust means, and slay their enemies just because they can (*BG* 16.4-14).

In Chapters 14, 17, and 18, Krishna elaborates what I argue is another theory of personality and behavior, the *guṇa* theory. The three *guṇa*-s, or strands, are *sattva*

(luminosity), *rajas* (activity), and *tamas* (delusion). Agents, actions, knowledge, happiness, and other mental states are described according to the three *guṇa*-s. Understanding the *guṇa* theory is important to my overall project in this dissertation and I devote much of Chapter 2 to it. Many *Gītā* commentators and scholars assume the *Gītā*'s *guṇa* theory is a theory of materialist metaphysics as it is in classical Sāṃkhya. I argue against this view.

Implicit in this theory is the view that personality is cultivated, maintained, and changed through behavior. With most *karman*, or action, the simple rule of "like begets like" applies. Engaging in most types of action produces the disposition to perform like action in the future (*BG* 6.44). The *karma yoga* teaching is based on this principle. Krishna teaches the practitioner to restrain desire and do his duty as an offering to God. Consistent practice of *karma yoga* transforms a selfish person into a virtuous one who spontaneously acts in a spirit of sacrifice.

Patañjali's *Yogasūtra* (2nd century BCE - 2nd century CE) posits *saṃskāra*-s, or subliminal impressions, as the mechanism of this effect.[19] Under this view, action performed out of desire, for example, leaves an impression on the subliminal mind. This impression remains, like a seed, until conditions are right for its ripening. It ripens as an urge to act on desire. The *Gītā* does not employ the concept of *saṃskāra* or anything like it. It is not clear how current action affects future action, but it is clear that it does.

The *Gītā* implies that psychological qualities and states also tend to reproduce themselves (*BG* 14.7-17), though again it is not clear how. The theory of the divine and demonic types and the *guṇa* theory both associate types of behavior with sets of psychological qualities and states, and imply that action creates the condition for associated qualities and states to arise in the future.

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[19] Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga-Sūtra of Patañjali: A New Translation and Commentary* (Rochester: Inner Traditions International, 1989) 57.

That future can extend beyond the life of the body. The transmigrating self carries along with it the *buddhi* (*BG* 6.43), perceptual senses, and mind (*manas*) (*BG* 15.7-8) from its previous embodiment. One's psychological make-up conveys into the next life.

I argue in Chapter 4 that Krishna recognizes two types of action, the ordinary and the ideal yogic. Ordinary action causes the self to take a new body after death (*BG* 6.41-45). This is what it means for action to bind (*bandh*) (*BG* 2.51, 3.31, 4.22-23, 9.28). Ideal yogic action, on the other hand, frees one from karmic bondage and leads to liberation.

The ultimate goal of yoga is liberation (*mokṣa*), or escape from rebirth (*BG* 2.15, 2.51, 5.17). Liberation is characterized by absolute peace (*BG* 2.64, 2.71, 4.39, 5.12, 5.29, 6.15, 18.53), unsurpassed bliss, joy, and contentment (*BG* 5.21, 5.24, 6.21, 6.27), and perfect equanimity (*BG* 2.15, 2.53, 4.22, 5.18-20, 12.3-4).

To the end of liberation Krishna teaches the practitioner to engage in action that does not bind. Escaping bondage requires transcending the *guṇa*-s, or the ability to look beyond one's own psychology for a reason to act (*BG* 14.20). I discuss transcendence of the *guṇa*-s further in Chapter 4 and argue that is a required by *karma yoga*.

Of all *guṇa*-related states, desire receives the most attention. Krishna seems to see it as the chief impediment to liberation and emphasizes equanimity (*samatva*, *samatā*, *sāmya*) as an important yogic requirement. He discusses equanimity positively as transcendence of evaluative dualities (*BG* 4.22), assumption of an evaluative stance that regards all things as equal (*BG* 4.22, 5.18-19, 6.8), and contentment with whatever happens by chance (*BG* 4.22). He describes it negatively as impartiality (*BG* 5.18-19, 6.9) and indifference (*BG* 6.9).

Though marked by evaluative neutrality, equanimity ultimately must be understood as a state characterized by positive affect, for one who is equanimious is

content. And in the recognition of sameness the equanimious practitioner identifies all things with God.

> He sees the self in all beings
> and all beings in the self.
> The one who is disciplined in yoga
> sees everywhere the same. (*BG* 6.29)
> Who sees me everywhere
> and sees all things in me,
> to him I am not lost,
> and he is not lost to me. (*BG* 6.30)
> He who loves me in all beings
> is established in oneness.
> Dwelling in all things,
> that practitioner dwells, too, in me. (*BG* 6.31)

Arjuna feels affection for Krishna (*BG* 11.41) and recognizes that Krishna feels the same for him (*BG* 11.44).[20] Likewise, the practitioner who sees Krishna everywhere will experience the affectively positive states of loving and being loved.

Equanimity is both a means and an end of yoga. It is presumably meant to be cultivated gradually, maintained with effort first for brief and then for longer periods of time. Finally, in liberation, it becomes a permanent quality.

The Gītā*'s ethics*

[20] Krishna's affection is made explicit in *BG* 18.64-65.

A brief introduction to the *Gītā*'s ethics is helpful for understanding *karma yoga* which involves doing one's duty.

Dharma is thought to derive from the verbal root *dhṛ* which means 'to sustain, support, or uphold'.[21] It first appears in the *Ṛg Veda* alongside *ṛta*. There *dharma* refers to an individual's obligations as based on conventions of religion and caste,[22] and *ṛta* refers to the "cosmic order by which the various phenomena of nature follow a particular course."[23] *Ṛta* is an impersonal law by which the universe functions harmoniously, in which all things, including people, have a proper place and function.[24]

Dharma is determined by *ṛta*. Moral laws and caste conventions are part of the cosmic order. *Ṛta* is *in se* normative and therefore *dharma* need not be justified. In applying dharmic norms, one "look[s] to the agreement of life with its source," John M. Koller explains.[25]

In the early Vedas, *dharma* usually occurs with *yajña*. Often translated as 'sacrifice', *yajña* refers to elaborate rituals prescribed by the Vedas for the sake of gaining wealth, progeny, land, a place in heaven after death, and so on. Vedic *yajña*, according to Koller, requires "the precise intonations of various formulas by a number

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[21] "Dharma," *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 2, 1987 ed.

[22] "Dharma," *Encyclopedia of Religion.*

[23] T. S. Rukmani, "Moral Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata," *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata*, ed. Bimal Krishna Matilal (Delhi: Indian Association of Advanced Study in association with Motilal Banarsidass, 1989) 23.

[24] "Dharma," *Encyclopedia of Religion.*

[25] John M. Koller, "Dharma: An Expression of Universal Order," *Philosophy East and West* 22.2 (1972): 133.

of priests and careful ceremonial activities spread over many days, sometimes even years."[26] Only the very wealthy could afford to have these rituals performed.

In this era, *yajña* is believed to maintain the various processes of the world as it promotes human thriving. Karl Werner defines it as "the ritual enactment of mutuality (or of the 'give and take' relation) between the individual and the universe."[27] Just as humans depend on natural forces (as personified by gods) for survival, so does the universe depend on human action. In *yajña* human beings give as well as receive. *Dharma* is fulfilled, then, through *yajña*.

According to Arnold Kunst, by the time of the *Gītā*, *ṛta* has "recede[d] as the force behind *dharma*"[28] and the term *dharma* conveys the sense of *ṛta* as well.[29] That is, the term *ṛta* disappears and one's *dharma* is determined by one's station in life. The term *svadharma*, or "one's own *dharma*," is often used. Doing one's *dharma* still contributes to world maintenance (*lokasaṃgraha*), and failure to do one's *dharma* is a threat to the world (*BG* 1.39-42, 3.14).

Dharma is no longer fulfilled by *yajña*. In the *Gītā*'s era Vedic *yajña* is in decline. Krishna is critical of it, saying it only secures temporary abode in heaven, not permanent liberation from rebirth (*BG* 2.45, 9.20-21, 11.48). The term *yajña* is retained but its sense reinterpreted. Under this new view any action performed in

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[26] Koller, "Expression of Universal Order" 134.

[27] Karel Werner, rev. of "The Broken World of Sacrifice: An Essay in Ancient Indian Ritual," by J. C. Heesterman, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 58.1 (1995): 176.

[28] Arnold Kunst, "Use and Misuse of Dharma," *The Concept of Duty in South Asia*, ed. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd, 1978) 8.

[29] Rukmani, "Moral Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata" 23.

spirit of reverence for the divine is *yajña*.[30] The latter is the appropriate attitude with which *dharma* should be performed.

While Krishna in the *Gītā* seems solely concerned with *svadharma*, elsewhere in Hindu literature *sanātanadharma*, or eternal duty, is emphasized. This is what is obligatory to everyone at all times, such as non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), honesty (*satya*), and non-stealing (*asteya*).[31] This concept does not seem to play a role in the *Gītā*.

Franklin Edgerton writes "the *Gītā* attempts no concrete definition of duty."[32] Except for *BG* 18.41-44 where the duties of the *brāhman*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, and *śūdra* classes are described, this seems to be the case. It is assumed, perhaps, that one knows what one's duties are, as Arjuna does. The *Gītā*'s ethics is role ethics and a form of moral realism in which moral facts are natural facts about the cosmic order. These facts, which have to do with social convention, biological necessities, and the role of ritual in natural processes are all in principle observable. The requirement of certain types of ritual for world maintenance was perceived through a special form of vision by the Vedic *ṛṣi*-s, or seers. Under such a form of naturalism it is not necessary, perhaps, to describe for one what one's *dharma* is. It should be apparent.

The *Gītā*'s ethics is, at the same time, a virtue ethics. Virtues are listed (*BG* 16.1-3) along with the means to cultivate them, which is yoga. Vices and their consequences are warned against at length (*BG* 16.4-18).

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[30] "Bhagavadgītā," *Encyclopedia of Religion*.

[31] Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, "The Clash Between Relative and Absolute Duty: The Dharma of Demons," *The Concept of Duty in South Asia*, (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd, 1978) 96; Rukmani, "Moral Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata" 28.

[32] Edgerton, *Bhagavad Gītā* 60.

The *Gītā*'s emphasis on duty has lead some to liken its ethics to that of Kant.[33] But the similarity is only superficial. Duty, for the *Gītā*, is determined by social conventions and natural laws, not by a person's rational nature. The moral person does not self-legislate but obeys convention, scripture, and biological necessity. Also, as Mohanty points out, moral laws are stated in hypothetical form in the *Gītā*: "If you wish to attain liberation then do your duty."[34]

Introduction to the Indian commentators

The remainder of this chapter is an introduction to the views that Indian commentators bring to their readings of the *Gītā*. I present the main elements of their metaphysics and also their views on the means and end of yoga.

I begin with Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja, two proponents of Vedānta. Vedānta means 'end of the Vedas' and refers to the Upanishads, scriptures dating from the 8th century BCE to the beginning of the common era. It is also used to refer to philosophical systems which are based on upanishadic teachings. Śaṅkara's Advaita (non-dualist) Vedānta and Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita (qualified non-dualist) Vedānta have a common basis in the Upanishads but differ in their most basic tenets.

The last two Indian commentators I introduce in this section, Abhinavagupta and Aurobindo, are Tantrics.

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[33] For example, Balbir Sing Gauchhwal Chandigarh, "Moral Religion of Kant and Karmayoga of the Gītā," *Kant-Studien* 55.4 (1964): 394-409.

[34] Mohanty. *Classical Indian Philosophy* 120.

Śaṅkara (8th century CE) propounds a non-dualist metaphysics. He is widely considered the greatest proponent of Advaita (non-dualist) Vedānta. His *Gītā* commentary is the oldest extant.

The central posit of all Vedāntic schools is Brahman. Brahman is the creator, world ground, and inner self of all beings. Advaita emphasizes the latter in its discussion of Brahman. Stephen Phillips writes "Advaita is above all, doctrinally, a philosophy of self," in which the identity of the self and Brahman is central above all else.[35]

In his *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* (*BSB*), Śaṅkara affirms Brahman as "consciousness alone, devoid of other aspects contrary to this, and without any distinguishing features" (*BSB* 3.2.16).[36] This view, he argues, is declared in the Upanishads, such as *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (*BU*) 4.5.13, which states

> As a lump of salt is without interior or exterior, entire, and purely saline in taste, even so is the Self [or Brahman] without interior or exterior, entire, and pure intelligence alone.[37]

His view is that Brahman is, essentially, awareness. As such, it is undifferentiated and has no attributes such as color, form, or texture (*BSB* 3.2.14).[38] He further cites such

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[35] Stephen Phillips, *Classical Indian Metaphysics* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995) 28.

[36] Śrī Śaṅkarācarya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya*, Swāmī Gambhīrānanda trans. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2000) 613.

[37] Swami Madhavananda trans., *The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1997) 542.

[38] Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 612.

upanishadic passages such as *KU* 1.3.15 which calls Brahman "soundless, touchless, colorless, undiminishing."[39]

Brahman is called "truth, knowledge, infinity" (*Taittirīya Upaniṣad (TU)* 2.1),[40] and elsewhere, bliss. These define Brahman's essence. Śaṅkara argues that these terms, which have different meanings in everyday usage, refer to the one, undifferentiated Brahman just as 'father', 'son', and 'husband' may refer to one man.

Śaṅkara acknowledges that form, color, and so on are attributed of Brahman in places in the Upanishads, such as in *BU* 1.3.22 where it is implied that Brahman has the three worlds as its body.[41] Śaṅkara explains that Brahman is only spoken of in such a way "for the sake of meditation" (*BSB* 3.2.12).[42] Many forms of meditation involve an object, such as the breath, and consist in maintaining awareness of that object. Here Śaṅkara seems to have in mind meditations with an ideational focus which use an image of Brahman as an object of meditation. For Śaṅkara, passages like *BU* 1.3.22 are practical, not representative of the nature of Brahman.

As consciousness, Brahman is "by nature eternal, pure, intelligent, and free" (*BSB* 3.2.22).[43] The self, too, shares in this nature, according to Śaṅkara, for the Upanishads declare that the self is identical to Brahman. He interprets the *mahāvākya* (great utterance) "*tat tvam asi" (*"you [an individual self] are that [*brahman*]";

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[39] Swāmī Gambhīrānanda trans., *Eight Upaniṣads with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya* vol. I (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2001) 176.

[40] Gambhīrānanda, *Eight Upaniṣads* 304.

[41] Madhavananda, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 54.

[42] Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 610.

[43] Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 624.

Cāndogya Upaniṣad (*CU*) 6.8-16)[44] to assert straightforward identity of the individual self and Brahman. The essence of the individual self is consciousness. It is without attributes, eternal, changeless, and intrinsically free. The individual self is no less than Brahman, and Brahman is no more than the individual self.

Briefly, Brahman/the individual self is free in the sense of being without desire, compulsion, or necessity in general. As we will see, action, in Śaṅkara's view, is illusory. The freedom he attributes to Brahman is not related to agency.

Śaṅkara holds Brahman to be the self of all beings, and at the same time, the world ground. Brahman is "the cause, origin, continuance, and dissolution of the universe" (*BSB* 1.1.5).[45] The *CU* 3.14.1 states:

> All this is Brahman. (This) is born from, dissolves in,
> and exists in that [Brahman].[46]

Śaṅkara holds the difficult position that Brahman is attributeless and undifferentiated, and the cause of the world of diverse, distinct phenomena. He argues that Brahman must be the efficient cause because there was nothing else that existed in the beginning. He argues that Brahman must be the material cause of the world because it is entailed by the upanishadic claim that by knowing Brahman everything else is known, just as by knowing one lump of clay, all things made of clay are understood

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[44] Swāmī Gambhīrānanda trans., *Chāndogya Upaniṣad with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama) 453-502.

[45] Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 68.

[46] Gambhīrānanda, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 208.

(*CU* 6.2.1).[47] Furthermore, Śaṅkara acknowledges, the Upanishads state that Brahman created by undergoing modifications (*TU* 2.7).[48]

What sort of modification can a changeless entity undergo? Śaṅkara explains that worldly phenomena are created by Brahman like images in a dream are generated by one who sleeps (*BSB* 2.1.28).[49] He likens everyday experience to dreaming. Śaṅkara holds that the world created by Brahman is merely apparent, and illusory because it seems to be real. Thus, his view is called *māyā-vāda* or illusionism.

Śaṅkara explains that illusory images appear through superimposition on the conscious self. He defines superimposition as the appearance of one thing as something else, and cites the experience of mother-of-pearl appearing to be silver as an example. His view is that through superimposition what is really Brahman, the self, or consciousness, appears as a myriad of phenomena.

Just as mistaking shell for silver does not affect the nature or value of the shell, superimposition of worldly phenomena on Brahman does not affect Brahman. The appearance of transitory phenomena does not render Brahman changeable, for example. And, the appearance of natural evil such as pain does not affect the "merit or demerit" of their locus (preamble to *BSB* 1.1.1).[50] The problem of evil is thus dismissed.

Śaṅkara supports his illusionism with the following argument. The existence of Brahman is indubitable, he argues. The self is a "self-revealing" entity which is

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[47] Gambhīrānanda, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 412.

[48] Gambhīrānanda, *Eight Upaniṣads* 359-66.

[49] Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 356.

[50] Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 4.

known immediately (preamble to *BSB* 1.1.1).[51] Everyone knows his self exists; no one ever thinks "I do not exist." (*BSB* 1.1.1).[52] That self is Brahman, and therefore Brahman exists. Objects, on the other hand, are not self-revealing. They are known mediately through the senses. Sublation is always possible. Just as we are mistaken when taking mother-of-pear to be silver, we might always be mistaken in taking mere appearance for real objects. Because of this ever-present possibility, objects cannot be determined, through perception, to be real or unreal (*BSB* 2.1.27).[53] Śaṅkara seeks, through this argument, to cast doubt on the status of the objects we perceive.

He rests his ultimate conclusion about the status of objects on upanishadic authority. He cites *BU* 2.3.6, which reads: "Now therefore the description [of Brahman]: 'Not this, not this.' Because there is no other and more appropriate description than 'Not this.'"[54] Śaṅkara takes this as a denial of the reality of apparent phenomena. "All creation, based on Brahman, is denied to be true by saying 'Not so, not so'" (*BSB* 3.2.22).[55] Śaṅkara also finds support in *CU* 6.1.4, which states that "all transformation . . . is name only."[56] He takes this to mean that the act of naming is prior to the appearance of namable entities. That is, phenomena are apprehended as

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[51] Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 3.

[52] Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 12.

[53] Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 354.

[54] Madhavananda, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 234.

[55] Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 624.

[56] Gambhīrānanda, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 409.

distinct only because of the mind's propensity to apply names. Based on such passages, Śaṅkara argues, "creation is know to be unreal" (*BSB* 3.2.22).[57]

This illusory world has yet a certain nature in his view. It is constituted by the *guṇa*-s, or strands, which generate objects, agency, and actions according to strict causal laws. Causation too belongs to the realm of illusion.

In Śaṅkara's view, freedom from illusion is the goal of yoga. Such freedom is achieved in *brahma-vidyā*, or knowledge of Brahman. *Brahma-vidyā* is discussed in the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 1.12 which states "After deliberating on the experiencer, the things experienced, and the ordainer, one should know all these three to be but the Brahman I speak of."[58]

Deliberation is the means Śaṅkara recommends to this realization. But, as Phillips points out, the realization is not an intellectual one. "It is, it must be stressed, a mystical self-experience that the Advaitins have in mind, a radical change of consciousness, not an intellectual view."[59] *Brahma-vidyā* is the experience of oneself, the objects of perception, and perception as all one and all Brahman. It is the perception of apparent distinctions as illusory. This realization releases one from the process of transmigration (*BSB* 1.1.1).[60] The realization of Brahman is liberation. Otherwise put, liberation is Brahman (*BSB* 3.4.52).[61]

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[57] Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 624.

[58] Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 611.

[59] Phillips, *Classical Indian Metaphysics* 29.

[60] Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 13.

[61] Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 810.

The Upanishads teach that Brahman "is to be sought for, he is to be inquired into" (*CU* 8.7.1).[62] Śaṅkara names the prerequisites for the practice of deliberation: "dispassion for the enjoyment of the fruits of work here and thereafter; a perfection of such practices as controlling the mind, control of the senses and organs, etc.; and a hankering for liberation" (*BSB* 1.1.1).[63] Deliberation on Brahman is *jñāna yoga* (yoga of wisdom) and consists in hearing teachings, contemplating them, and meditating on them as described in *BU* 2.4.5: "The self . . . should be realized, should be heard of, reflected on, and meditated upon."[64]

While Śaṅkara does teach that *jñāna yoga* leads to liberation, he also argues that liberation is not a product. For, causation is illusory. Śaṅkara's promise that *jñāna yoga* leads to liberation is meant for the ignorant, and it is to the ignorant that yoga instruction must appeal. However, one who has achieved *brahma-vidyā* recognizes that his realization happens instantaneously, nay, atemporally. For *brahma-vidyā* is just Brahman, and Brahman is uncaused and eternally present (*BSB* 3.4.52).[65]

Śaṅkara holds that action and agency are illusory. In his commentary on the *Gītā* he argues that *karma yoga*, while emphasized in the *Gītā,* cannot lead to liberation. Śaṅkara states that *karma yoga* "consists in the performance . . . of works as a means to *mokṣa*, requiring a knowledge of virtue and sin, and presupposing that

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[62] Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 24.

[63] Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 9.

[64] Madhavananda, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 247.

[65] Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 810.

the self is distinct from the body and is the doer and enjoyer."[66] He explains that this set of presuppositions is based on the "idea of agency and multiplicity,"[67] which is accepted only by the ignorant. He argues that the self, as Brahman, does not change, and hence really does not act.[68] Still, Krishna teaches *karma yoga* in the *Gītā,* and Śaṅkara does recognize some value in it. He explains that it is a means to purify the mind and prepare one for *jñāna yoga*.[69] But he maintains that ultimately *jñāna yoga* is necessary for liberation.[70]

Śaṅkara takes Krishna in the *Gītā* to represent Brahman.[71] He explains that Krishna's apparent individuality is due to *māyā* (illusion). In this way, Śaṅkara is able to interpret the devotional elements of the *Gītā* as encouragement to seek *brahma-vidyā* (knowledge of Brahman). And the latter is, of course, to practice *jñāna yoga*.

Rāmānuja (12th century CE), the founder of Viśiṣṭādvaita (qualified non-dualist) Vedānta, responds to Śaṅkara in formulating his system. Rāmānuja maintains the unity of all things with Brahman but in a way very different from Śaṅkara's. In further contrast to his predecessor, Rāmānuja emphasizes common-sense realism about perception.

For Rāmānuja, Brahman is the "supreme person." He often refers to Brahman by the term *īśvara* (God, Lord), and in this section I use the latter term.

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[66] Śaṅkarācārya, *Bhagavad Gita* 24.

[67] Śaṅkarācārya, *Bhagavad Gita* 25.

[68] Śaṅkarācārya, *Bhagavad Gita* 24.

[69] Śaṅkarācārya, *Bhagavad Gita* 5, 94.

[70] Śaṅkarācārya, *Bhagavad Gita* 5, 93.

[71] Śaṅkarācārya. *Bhagavad Gita* 121.

Īśvara, Rāmānuja explains in his *Śrī-bhāṣya* (*ŚB*), is the "abode of all auspicious qualities to an infinite degree and is free from all worldly taint" (*ŚB* 1.1.1).[72] *Īśvara* is also "the creator, preserver, and destroyer of this universe, which it pervades and of which it is the inner ruler."[73] The cosmos of sentient beings and insentient objects is the body of *īśvara*, and *īśvara*, as inner ruler of that body, is its self. Thus, Rāmānuja holds that *īśvara* is a differentiated entity and has a "twofold characteristic."[74] That is, it possesses two sets of attributes. First, it possesses all good qualities such as existence, consciousness, and bliss, each to the greatest extent. Second, it possesses the cosmos, which consists of insentient material nature and sentient individual selves, as its body.

Rāmānuja understands *māyā* not as 'illusion' but as 'power'.[75] Thus, where Śaṅkara takes apparent diversity to be a product of illusion, Rāmānuja takes it to be a product of *īśvara*'s creative power. He holds that *īśvara* must be both the efficient and material cause of the world. He argues, as Śaṅkara does of Brahman, that *īśvara* must be the efficient cause because there is nothing other than *īśvara* that could be the efficient cause. He further argues, again as Śaṅkara does of Brahman, that *īśvara* must be the material cause of the world because it is entailed by the upanishadic claim

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[72] Bādrāyana, *Brahmasūtras; Śrī-bhāṣya: With Text and English Rendering of the Sūtras, Comments, and Index*, trans. Swami Vireswarananda and Swami Adidevananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1978) 1. Note that this volume contains Rāmānuja's *Śrī-bhāṣya*, though his name does not appear anywhere in the proper citation.

[73] Bādrāyana, *Brahmasūras* (Rāmānuja's *Śrī-bhāṣya*) 55.

[74] Bādrāyana, *Brahmasūras* (Rāmānuja's *Śrī-bhāṣya*) 337-40.

[75] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 10.

that by knowing *īśvara* everything else is known, just as by knowing one lump of clay, all things made of clay are understood (*CU* 6.2.1).[76]

He differentiates between non-substance, which includes qualities (the three *guṇa*-s, or strands, belong to these), causal efficacy, and universals, and substance, which includes material nature (*prakṛti*), individual selves (*jīva*), and *īśvara*. He accepts one fundamental relation, that of inseparability (*apṛthak-siddi*). This relation may hold between a substance and a non-substance, and thus he accounts for substances having states and undergoing change. The inseparability relation may hold between substance and substance. Three important instances of this relation are the inseparability of an individual self with a body, *īśvara* and an individual self, and *īśvara* and the cosmos as a whole. A substance standing in a relation of inseparability to either a substance or non-substance is termed qualified (*viśiṣta*).[77] Rāmānuja holds that *īśvara* is qualified by individual selves and material objects.

Rāmānuja is thus able to maintain the reality of the world of diverse, finite entities, while affirming the non-duality (*advaita*) of the world with the infinite Brahman. For Rāmānuja non-duality is inseparability, not identity. He argues that individual selves are finite and cannot be identical to *īśvara*, as Śaṅkara holds.[78] Still, individual selves are one with *īśvara*. A relationship of inseparability holds between them in which individual selves qualify *īśvara* like an attribute qualifies a substance. Rāmānuja illustrates the relationship in a variety of ways, seeking to "bring out all the implications of such relationship," according to Svāmī Tapasyānanda.[79]

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[76] Gambhīrānanda, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 412.

[77] Mohanty, *Classical Indian Philosophy* 55.

[78] Mohanty, *Classical Indian Philosophy* 89.

[79] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 21.

For one, Rāmānuja describes it as a body-self (*śarīra-śarīrī*) relationship. Rāmānuja's claim that *īśvara* stands in a self-body relationship to the cosmos was introduced above. Just as *īśvara* stands in a self-body relationship to the entire cosmos, he likewise stands in a self-body relationship to each individual self. He is the inner self of each individual self.[80] Cyril Veliath explains that for Rāmānuja, *īśvara* is the "inner director" of all individual selves; *īśvara* "owns, directs, and governs" them.[81]

Rāmānuja describes the relationship between individual selves and *īśvara* in another way which rests on the distinction between two forms of predication. The first is termed coordinate predication in terms of identity (*aikya samānādhikaraṇya*) and the second coordinate predication in terms of substance and attribute (*guṇa samānādhikaraṇya*). "This is that Devadatta [who was seen earlier under different conditions]" exemplifies the first type. 'This' and 'that' have a common referent, Devadatta. "Blue lotus" exemplifies the second type, which holds between two or more attributes having identity of substratum. In the example, blueness and lotushood refer to two attributes both inhering in a common substratum, material nature, without losing their individuality.[82]

Rāmānuja takes the 'you' and 'that' of "*tat tvam asi*" ("you [an individual self] are that [*brahman*]"; *CU* 6.8-16)[83] to refer to two non-identical attributes which have a common substratum. His aim is to preserves the individuality of both the individual

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[80] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 19, 21.

[81] Cyril Veliath, *The Mysticism of Rāmānuja* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1993) 131.

[82] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 19-21.

[83] Gambhīrānanda, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 453-502.

self (*jīva*) and *īśvara* while accommodating the upanishadic doctrine of identity. Svāmī Tapasyānanda explains:

> The almighty God [*īśvara*] and the little *jīva* can never be equated with each other. But the mighty *īśvara*, who is the indweller in the cosmic body, is also the indweller in every *jīva*. Thus every *jīva* individually is the body of *īśvara*, just as the cosmos as a whole is too.[84]

Rāmānuja takes 'that' (*tat*) to refer to *īśvara* as the indwelling self of the cosmic body. He takes 'you' (*tvam*) to refer to *īśvara* as the indwelling self of each individual self.[85] 'That' and 'you' both refer to *īśvara*, variously qualified.

Further, Rāmānuja calls *īśvara* substance (*prakāri*) and the individual selves and material nature his modes (*prakāra*). The modes of a substance do not exist apart from the substance. In the same way, individual selves and material nature do not exits apart from *īśvara*. Modes may be various and distinct from each other but do not differ from the substance in which they inhere. In the same way, while individuals selves are distinct from each other and from material nature, they are not distinct from *īśvara*.[86]

Kalidas Bhattacharya explains that, in Rāmānuja's view, individual selves are distinct from one another but "adjectival to God [*īśvara*],"[87] and form a unity with *īśvara*. Bhattacharya identifies two types of unity for comparison. The first is a loose

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[84] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 21.

[85] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 21.

[86] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 21.

[87] Kalidas Bhattacharya, "The Status of the Individual in Indian Philosophy," *Philosophy East and West* 14.2 (1964), 138.

unity which admits of separability, such as a man with a stick. The second is a close unity in which separability is not possible, such as holds between blueness and a flower in a blue flower. The unity of individual selves with *īśvara*, he explains, is of the close variety. Individual selves cannot exist separate from *īśvara*, and though *īśvara* can exist without them, he, in fact, never does.

Rāmānuja also likens the relationship of *īśvara* and individual selves to the relationship between master and subordinate (*śeṣa-śeṣī*). Like the subordinate for the master, individual selves exist "for the use and purpose" of *īśvara*.[88] The realization of one's subservience, holds Rāmānuja, is the source of the greatest delight possible for an individual self, as it is for a master's subordinate. Svāmī Tapasyānanda explains "they find the real meaning of their existence in such realization."[89]

For all his effort in elaborating the *īśvara-jīva* relationship, Rāmānuja still flounders on a key point. Does agency belong to the individual self, or does *īśvara* determine behavior? In places he states that actions are determined by dispositions, desires, and other psychological factors that obey strict causal laws. Rāmānuja explains that *īśvara* endowed individuals selves with dispositions, desires, and other factors in creating them. Thus, in places, Rāmānuja holds that one's behavior is due solely to one's nature as given by *īśvara*. In others places he seems to hold that the individual self does have agency. Veliath concludes that Rāmānuja does not arrive at a "satisfactory answer" to this question.[90] I do see Rāmānuja as making a commitment, ultimately, to determinism. I discuss this issue in Chapter 2.

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[88] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 22.

[89] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 22. A modern Western audience may have difficulty in relating to the sentiment Svāmī Tapasyānanda describes.

[90] Veliath, *Mysticism of Rāmānuja* 136.

Rāmānuja understands liberation as release from transmigration. In his view, the knowledge of *īśvara*'s nature results in liberation.[91] Such knowledge reveals *īśvara* as the inner self of the individual self. This destroys ignorance about one's own true nature. Upon the destruction of ignorance, he holds, the individual self ceases to cling to bodily existence.[92] At the same time, the karmic residues of past actions are destroyed.[93] He understands karmic residue as the dispositions, caused by actions both good and bad, to perform similar actions in the future. Karmic residue is a condition of embodiment, in Rāmānuja's view. When it remains upon death it causes the individual self to take on a new body.

Rāmānuja holds that full realization of *īśvara* is only possible upon death. Connection to a body, he explains, obstructs full realization of the self's true nature (*ŚB* 3.2.12).[94] This obstruction can only removed by death.

As Phillips says of *brahma-vidyā* in Advaita, knowledge of *īśvara* is not mere intellectual understanding of the scriptures that describe *īśvara*'s nature. For, Rāmānuja argues, it is well known that one may be versed in the scriptures and yet not be liberated (*ŚB* 1.1.1).[95] Meditation is required. Rāmānuja defines meditation as "constant remembrance," and explains that, when perfected, constant remembrance "assumes the same form as seeing or direct perception" (*ŚB* 1.1.1).[96] But constant

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[91] Bādrāyana, *Brahmasūras* (Rāmānuja's *Śrī-bhāṣya*) 4.

[92] Bādrāyana, *Brahmasūras* (Rāmānuja's *Śrī-bhāṣya*) 43.

[93] Bādrāyana, *Brahmasūras* (Rāmānuja's *Śrī-bhāṣya*) 449.

[94] Bādrāyana, *Brahmasūras* (Rāmānuja's *Śrī-bhāṣya*) 339.

[95] Bādrāyana, *Brahmasūras* (Rāmānuja's *Śrī-bhāṣya*) 4.

[96] Bādrāyana, *Brahmasūras* (Rāmānuja's *Śrī-bhāṣya*) 6.

remembrance alone does not yield vision of *īśvara*. *Īśvara* must reveal itself to the aspirant. He does so only to that aspirant who loves him, for "he who extremely loves this self is loved by this self" (*ŚB* 1.1.1).[97] For Rāmānuja, constant remembrance is a form of *bhakti* (devotion). He holds *bhakti* as ultimately necessary for liberation. He writes: "Seeking refuge with the Lord is the only means for . . . the attainment of self-realization."[98]

Still, in his *Gītā Bhāṣya* (*GB*), Rāmānuja recognizes three form of yoga. He allows that the aspirant may choose between *jñāna yoga*, *karma yoga*, and *bhakti yoga*, "according to [his] liking."[99]

Rāmānuja takes these three paths as distinct, though mutually involved.[100] That is, each one involves *jñāna* (knowledge), *karman* (action), and *bhakti* (devotion). The difference between the three yogas seems to be a matter of which of these elements is emphasized.

The *jñāna yoga* practitioner must do action in order to sustain the body.[101] *Jñāna yoga* generates devotion because the knowledge it emphasizes is knowledge of *īśvara*.[102] Personalistic and possessed of all good qualities, to know *īśvara* is to love

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[97] Bādrāyana, *Brahmasūras* (Rāmānuja's *Śrī-bhāṣya*) 7.

[98] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 480-81.

[99] Rāmānuja. *Gītā Bhāṣya* 595.

[100] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 16.

[101] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 124.

[102] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 116.

him. *Jñāna yoga* leads directly to the abiding state of single-minded contemplation of *īśvara* which is the ultimate means of realizing *īśvara*.[103]

Karma yoga, likewise, involves knowledge. According to Rāmānuja, some wisdom is a prerequisite of *karma yoga* practice, as Krishna teaches Arjuna about the self (in *BG* 2.11-30) before instructing him in *karma yoga* practice.[104] *Karma yoga* involves devotion because works performed by a the practitioner are to be sacrificed to *īśvara*.[105]

Finally, *bhakti yoga* requires knowledge of *īśvara* just as *jñāna yoga* and *karma yoga* do. And, in addition to the meditative practice of joyous contemplation of the divine, the *bhakti yoga* practitioner engages in a variety of works as part of his practice. This includes prayer, recitation of the various names of *īśvara*, prostration, and activities, Rāmānuja writes, "such as performing worship and doing actions helpful to worship, like building temples and cultivating temple gardens."[106]

While Rāmānuja holds *bhakti yoga* supreme,[107] he recommends an aspirant begin with *karma yoga* since "there [is] no chance of errors."[108] By 'error' he seems to mean misdeeds in a moral sense. Violation of morality results in karmic residue that binds the individual further to bodily life, thus serving as an obstacle to liberation. Rāmānuja explains that error cannot occur because action performed in *karma yoga* is

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[103] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 115-16.

[104] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 116.

[105] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 144.

[106] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 304.

[107] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 293, 596.

[108] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 123.

obligatory.[109] He assumes that it is a simple matter for the practitioner to do only what is obligatory.

Rāmānuja seems to recommend that *karma yoga* should be practiced before *jñāna yoga*. The former is a good preparation because it reduces attachment to sense objects.[110] Further, he promises that all rites performed as *karma yoga* culminate in meditation.[111] The reason is that *karma yoga* removes "sin," or the subliminal residue left by past misdeeds, which "obstruct[s] the origination of knowledge" (SB 1.1.1).[112] This is all the more reason to begin with *karma yoga* and proceed later to *jñāna yoga*.

Rāmānuja holds that *jñāna yoga* leads one to *bhakti yoga*. For the goal of *jñāna yoga*, he writes, is "vision of the self,"[113] and explains that vision of the seeker's self is an "accessory to *bhakti*."[114] The reason is that to know one's own true nature is to know *īśvara*, since *īśvara* is the inner self of one's self. Meditation on the self progresses to meditation on *īśvara*.

To meditate on *īśvara* is, according to Rāmānuja, to "practice the succession of memory of unsurpassed love of [*īśvara*]."[115] At this stage, meditation is not dispassionate but an exercise of fervent *bhakti*. In Rāmānuja's view, liberation can be gained only through love.

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[109] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 124.

[110] See also Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 116.

[111] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 210.

[112] Bādrāyana, *Brahmasūras* (Rāmānuja's *Śrī-bhāṣya*) 7.

[113] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 209.

[114] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 116.

[115] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 597.

The Tantric Abhinavagupta (11th century CE) calls his system *svātantryavāda* or voluntarism. Modern scholars such as K. C. Pandey and Paul Muller-Ortega call it Kashmir Śaivism.

Abhinavagupta holds a theistic non-dualism in which the unity of all things is identified with Lord Śiva. His view amounts to idealism, as he describes Śiva as a universal mind in which all selves and all phenomena have their existence. Phenomena lack self-existence, yet are real as expressions of Śiva.

Śiva, in Abhinavagupta's view, has two powers: *kriyāśakti*, or power to act, and *jñānaśakti*, or power to know.[116] The former is exercised as the ability to manifest phenomena. The latter is exercised in manifesting limited subjects, objects, and all other factors involved in cognition. These two powers are ultimately not distinct; Śiva's power to manifest phenomena is his power to know.[117] For, the phenomena Śiva generates are of the nature of thought, and what is of such nature is necessarily known. On the other hand, the power to know presupposes a power to manifest knowable phenomena.

Abhinavagupta likens Śiva to a mirror and worldly phenomena to a mirror's reflections.[118] A mirror's reflections appear distinct from the mirror but in reality are not. Similarly, worldly phenomena appear distinct from Śiva but are not. Like a mirror, Śiva is unaffected by the appearances, and the changes in them, which have him for their medium. Unlike a mirror, Śiva is self-aware, produces appearances independently, and is aware of the appearances he so produces. Pandey explains that

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[116] Abhinavagupta, *Īśvara-Pratyabhijñā-Vimarśinī*, ed. R. C. Dwivedi, K. A. Subramania Iyer, and K. C. Pandey, vol. 2 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986) *x*.

[117] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 2 *x-xi*.

[118] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 2 *xiii-xiv*.

"reality," in Abhinavagupta's view, "is the mind and the universe is nothing but the thought of the universal mind."[119]

Abhinavagupta takes the power to act and the power to know as essential to Śiva. They are not differentiable from their possessor, in his view, just as there is no difference between fire and its power to burn. Abhinavagupta holds that Śiva is his consciousness and creativity.

He argues for his idealism as follows. Objects, as we perceive them, are mere appearances to the mind. We cannot infer, based on this experience, that mind-independent external objects exist which underlie our perceptions. Such objects themselves would be imperceptible, and "inference [cannot] operate in relation to those things which have never been an object of direct experience."[120] That is, inference to imperceptible objects is invalid, and so we must take objects to be merely apparent and mind-dependent.

Abhinavagupta explains that the objects manifested by Śiva, being of the nature of thought, are luminous (*prakāśamaya*) or apparent.[121] Luminosity, or the "light of consciousness," is the essence of objects. Therefore, the objective is not essentially different from the subjective. But objects cannot be identical with individual subjects. He explains they are "cognized as separate from the individual subjects, because of their having been separated from the individual subjects."[122] An object may be perceived by a subject for a time, then not perceived, and later

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[119] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 2 *xiv*.

[120] Abhinavagupta, *Īśvara-Pratyabhijñā-Vimarśinī*, ed. R. C. Dwivedi, trans. K. C. Pandey, vol. 3 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986) 67.

[121] Abhinavagupta *IPV* vol. 2 *xv*.

[122] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 55.

perceived again. Objects are not identical with individual subjects, and therefore, "the [appearance] of objects . . . is logically possible only if they be admitted to be within the true subject [Śiva]."[123] Abhinavagupta reaches this conclusion in some haste. He may have in mind an argument like the one later made by George Berkeley: objects can exist only in the consciousness of some conscious subject, but they cannot exist in individual subjects. God (or for Abhinavagupta, Śiva) is the only other candidate, so they must have their existence in God (or Śiva).[124]

The subjects manifested by Śiva are essentially self-conscious (*vimarśa*). Abhinavagupta argues that knowledge and doubt presuppose self-consciousness, so anyone involved in the philosophical enterprise must admit his view. "If we deny self-shining nature to subject," he writes, "there remains no room for questions and answers."[125] His reason seems to be that the cognition "I know" involves the awareness that "I exist."

Abhinavagupta claims that knowledge also invariably involves a "stir."[126] This stir is the power of action, and "becomes directly perceptible as physical action."[127] He takes the capacity for action as an aspect of sentience and observable through introspection. He sees self-consciousness and freedom as inextricable.

Being self-conscious, the self is likewise luminous (*prakāśa*) or apparent. The former straightforwardly entails the latter.

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[123] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 55.

[124] George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, ed. Jonathan Dancy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[125] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 16.

[126] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 17..

[127] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 17.

Abhinavagupta argues that it follows from the luminosity of the self and objects that Śiva exists. He proceeds by *reductio ad absurdum*, supposing Śiva did not exist.

> But if [the individual selves] be self-confined . . . how [could they] make the objects shine (manifest)? But if the objects also be admitted to be essentially self-shining, then, they also being self-confined, the distinction between the perceiver and the perceived will be lost.[128]

His seems to mean the following. If Śiva did not exist, individual selves might be luminous, but they would be "self confined," or limited to self-consciousness. If Śiva did not exist there would be no objects to serve as the objects of knowledge, and individual selves could be conscious of only of themselves. For, though luminous, individual selves would still not have the ability to make objects apparent (or manifest). Further, if Śiva did not exist, luminosity might still belong to objects in themselves, but then the objects would be "self-confined," or without observers. Subject and object would both be both luminous and "self-confined" and thus there would be no real difference between subject and object, which would make knowledge impossible, an absurd conclusion. Since there is knowledge, Abhinavagupta seems to argue, Śiva must exist.

Abhinavagupta maintains that Śiva "includes the whole of the objective universe within itself,"[129] but it does not follow, he argues, that all objects will be

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[128] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 37.

[129] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 37.

apparent at all times. Rather, Śiva "makes some objects manifest as separate from itself [as individual subjects]," and "this is called the power of knowledge."[130]

Abhinavagupta, further, lets the experiences of objects as luminous and our selves as self-conscious and free inform his view of Śiva's nature. Pandey writes that Abhinavagupta's "conception of the macrocosm is based on a very careful study of the microcosm."[131] Abhinavagupta holds to the typically Tantric view that the microcosm and macrocosm are homologous. According to this view, if objects are luminous (*prakāśa*), then so is Śiva. Similarly, he reasons that since subjects are self-conscious and free (*vimarśa*), so must be Śiva. Abhinavagupta seems to arrive at his understanding of Śiva's nature this way, and then evoke Śiva to explain luminosity, self-consciousness, and freedom.

Abhinavagupta holds that the individual selves and objects manifested by Śiva reflect his nature. They are identical to Śiva and likewise to each other in essence, if not appearance. This entails that since Śiva is omniscient and omnipotent, so are individual subjects.

Furthermore, in Abhinavagupta's view, Śiva is free in a libertarian sense and so are individual subjects. Abhinavagupta calls Śiva the *svātantrā icchā*, or free will.[132] His manner of creation differs from "ordinary everyday creation" which depends on supporting causes such as clay and wood.[133] Śiva's freedom is such that in creating, his will is the only cause. Śiva's actions have his cause in his will alone; determination by any other factor is ruled out.

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[130] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 37.

[131] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 2 *xvi*.

[132] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 2 *xvii*.

[133] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 65.

Abhinavagupta makes an argument for Śiva's freedom based on experience, again letting examination of the microcosm support his view of the macrocosm.

> . . . in the case of the various creations of city and army, etc. by the simple will of a [yogic adept] there is no possibility of representing them to be due to different material causes . . .
> Therefore, it may be admitted that such is the spiritual power of a [yogic adept] that it makes the objects, which are nothing else than various manifestations of spiritual power, manifest. Therefore, it is possible that [Śiva], whose power of freedom is acknowledged, manifests these objects of the world . . . . why not admit [unlimited] freedom of the sentient [universal] self . . . which has the support of experience?[134]

The argument goes: advanced yoga practitioners have been seen to create cities and armies without material cause, from pure will. Therefore, it is possible that Śiva creates in this way too, and there is no reason to think he should not, given that some adepts do. While the modern reader is not likely to have witnessed an adept achieve such acts, yogic literature acknowledges many such *siddhi*-s (accomplishments) the advanced practitioner may come to exhibit. While these powers most often take the form of extra-sensory perception or extraordinary control over one's own body, such as the ability to levitate, some texts acknowledge miraculous creative powers.[135] Those of Abhinavagupta's milieu would probably not have balked at such a premise.

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[134] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 65-66.

[135] *Yoga-Bhāṣya* 3.45 (5th century CE), for example, names *īśitritva* (lordship) as a *siddhi* (accomplishment). The practitioner possessing *īśitritva* has control over the

The goal of yoga, in Abhinavagupta's view, is freedom from all limitation. His notion of liberation includes more than freedom from transmigration. It is a state of unlimited being, knowledge, power, and bliss. In his view, liberation is gained through realization of one's identity with Śiva. The practitioner who has reached the goal knows "I alone, who am essentially light [or self-consciousness and freedom], am shining [as the objects that appear to be distinct]."[136] He achieves unitive vision, seeing all things as consisting of his own consciousness.[137] His realization goes beyond a mere belief about the world to seeing the world with new eyes. His vision empowers him to "act and create as Śiva himself."[138] His human body and mind, being manifestations in consciousness, are not obstacles to his realization. Liberation is possible for the embodied. More than that, immortality of the body is possible. The liberated practitioner may choose to manifest for himself an undying body.[139]

In unrealized individual selves, Abhinavagupta explains, omniscience, omnipotent, and true freedom are present but veiled by ignorance.[140] Thus, he asserts both omniscience and ignorance of ordinary human beings, which seems problematic. He has the further problem of positing the existence of individual selves in the non-

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subtle causes of the material world, and the power to create that parallels that of the Creator.

[136] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 70.

[137] Paul Eduardo Muller-Ortega, *The Triadic Heart of Śiva: Kaula Tantricism of Abhinavagupta in the Non-Dual Shaivism of Kashmir* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1997) 9.

[138] Muller-Ortega, *Triadic Heart* 9.

[139] Muller-Ortega, *Triadic Heart* 28.

[140] Abhinavagupta, *Īśvara-Pratyabhijñā-Vimarśinī*, ed. R. C. Dwivedi, K. A. Subramania Iyer, and K. C. Pandey, vol. 1 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986) *vi*.

dual, self-conscious totality that is Śiva. He addresses these problems by elaborating the limiting conditions of the finite self.

Abhinavagupta describes the finite self as conditioned by five factors.[141] The first is *kāla* (time), which engenders the idea succession in relation to the body and objects of knowledge. Second is *vidyā* (knowledge), which gives rise to limited cognitive ability. The primary cognitive ability *vidyā* supports is that of distinguishing between pleasure and pain. The third factor is *kalā* (constituent part of a sacrifice, mechanical or fine art). It gives rise to notions of what ought to be done. The fourth is *rāga* (passion), which is responsible for the tendency of the mind to superimpose qualities such as beauty onto perceived objects. *Rāga* gives rise to the intention that something in particular be done to the exclusion of other ends. Finally, *niyati* (necessity) generates attachment to certain objects.[142] These conditions together constitute the ignorance of individual selves. This ignorance is the basis of their apparent individuality.

Finite selves are ultimately identical with Śiva, but their ignorance blocks realization of this fact. There is something odd in this view. It amounts to saying that Śiva submits himself to ignorance. Why would he do that? At bottom, as Muller-Ortega puts it, is the "bald statement that the finite self is maintained in its condition because of the will of Śiva."[143]

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[141] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 197-99. Elsewhere, in the *Parātrīśikā-laghuvṛtti* 5-9, he elaborates a theory of four sheaths. The first consists of air, and provides a limited capacity for action. The second sheath, formed of fire, provides a finite capacity of knowledge. Consisting of water, the third satiates, or brings to fruition what is willed. The fourth is made of the element earth and allows for limited willing. See Muller-Ortega, *Triadic Heart* 130.

[142] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 197-99.

[143] Muller-Ortega, *Triadic Heart* 130.

Still, the theory of the five-fold conditions is helpful as an elaboration of the nature of the finite self. Importantly for us here, it shows that the capacity for willing possessed by an ordinary individual differs significantly from Śiva's unlimited freedom. "Those who are essentially of the nature of pure consciousness but are without supreme freedom . . . have been made so by the highest Lord."[144] Willing is conditioned by the recognition of pleasure and pain, which is made possible by the factor *vidyā* and constrained by the subliminal impressions accrued through past experience. Abhinavagupta explains that finite selves perceive objects "according to the residual traces [of past experience] . . . as associated with different indicatory words such as 'This is dear', 'This is [an] enemy'."[145] That is, objects are associated with various past pleasures and pains. This association determines desire. "When we remember a past pleasure we desire for the object that gave it."[146] Desire, which is due to the factor *rāga*, determines what will be done. Thus, the will of a finite self is determined to specific choices by the tendency to cognize some things as pleasurable and some things as painful, and by past experience of pleasure and pain and the desires they engender. On the other hand, Śiva is not so constrained. His will is entirely unconditioned.

Should the unrealized individual wish to embark on the path of yoga practice, Abhinavagupta teaches an esoteric practice that emphasizes chanting, restraint and redirection of the body's subtle energies (*prāṇa*), meditation, and ritual.[147] Other elements are included such as contemplation of geometrical designs (*maṇḍala* and

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[144] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 205.

[145] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 225.

[146] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 137.

[147] Muller-Ortega, *Triadic Heart* 50-53, 59-60.

yantra), consumption of alcohol and meat, and sexual ritual. Muller-Ortega notes that the lineage avails itself of teleological justification: "Any means is valid if it will accomplish the goal of taking man to [the] divinized state."[148]

While he took enough of an interest in the *Gītā* to produce a brief commentary on the text, the *Gītā* is not emphasized in Abhinavagupta's own practical teachings. This does not mean that the text was of no practical value to him, or had no influence on his yoga teachings. It may be that the practices described in the *Gītā* were so well-incorporated into popular religion by Abhinavagupta's time that they fell into the background of common practices that served as a foundation for the more involved practices of Abhinavagupta's lineage.

Aurobindo (early 20th century CE), a Tantric, propounds a non-dual view in which all things belong to a totality identical with Brahman. Unlike Abhinavagupta, Aurobindo is a realist who acknowledges the existence of matter along with immaterial mind and spirit. In Aurobindo's view, Brahman is the common source and substratum of both the material and immaterial.

Brahman, as Aurobindo understands him, has twin aspects.[149] He is the indefinable, inconceivable, timeless absolute, and at the same time the omnipresent reality of phenomenal existence. In his latter aspect, Brahman is matter, mind, life, time, change, cause and effect, self-consciousness, the self in each individual, and the bliss inherent to all sentient beings. Aurobindo explains that Brahman possesses *yoga-māyā*, or consciousness-force, through which he self-manifests as the universe.[150] Aurobindo conceives of the universe as evolutionary in nature and describes its

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[148] Muller-Ortega, *Triadic Heart* 52.

[149] Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* (New York: The Greystone Press, 1949) 294.

[150] Aurobindo, *Life Divine* 105, 294.

manifestation as proceeding in stages, as follows.[151] Matter is manifested first. Through apparently dead, life is veiled in matter. With time, life evolves out of matter. Living beings arise, evolving organs and faculties necessary to sustaining life. Life is insentient at first but is a veiled form of consciousness. Mind eventually evolves out of life and sentient beings appear. Mental faculties are crude at first but become more sophisticated over time. Human beings possess the highest mental faculties of all beings and are destined to develop even higher ones. Aurobindo finds in people an innate impulse to "God, light, bliss, freedom, [and] immortality,"[152] and maintains that this impulse is the underlying motivation of all human behavior. It indicates, in his eyes, that evolution beyond our current mental faculties is inevitable. Aurobindo does not attempt to elaborate the number and nature of the evolutionary stages that lie ahead. To do so is perhaps beyond our current intellectual abilities. However, he believes the final stage is to manifest God. The *telos* of the universe's evolution can be ascertained, he thinks, by reflecting on the universe's source. Omniscience, omnipotence, immortality, perfect goodness, and bliss will appear. Human beings will manifest these qualities as they have mind.

Aurobindo qualifies his predictions of omniscience, omnipotence, and immortality. Immortality is possible for the self but not the body. As for omniscience and omnipotence, these qualities will be attained by mankind collectively, not by individuals. Brahman seeks to express in mankind, he writes, "some image of the unity, omniscience, omnipotence which are the self-conception of the Divine."[153] The

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[151] Aurobindo, *Life Divine* 5-6.

[152] Aurobindo, *Life Divine* 5.

[153] Aurobindo, *Life Divine* 16.

burgeoning of science and technology in Aurobindo's era seemed, to him, to be proof of our collective evolution toward omniscience and omnipotence.

Both Aurobindo and Abhinavagupta assert a microcosm-macrocosm homology, but they take different entities for the microcosm. Abhinavagupta identifies individual human beings as microcosmic reflections of the macrocosmic divine. Thus he attributes omniscience and omnipotence to all human individuals. This is problematic, since most of us know ourselves to be of limited knowledge and power. Aurobindo avoids this problem by taking mankind as a whole as the macrocosmic reflection of the divine. His view allows that the individual be limited while Brahman's omniscience and omnipotence are still fully reflected in mankind.

All human endeavors, Aurobindo holds, contribute to the end of reflecting Brahman's omniscience, omnipotence, bliss, and freedom. Hence Aurobindo takes the most liberal stance possible on the question of what constitutes valid yogic means to liberation. "All life," he writes, "is either consciously or subconsciously a yoga . . . . all life, when we look beyond its appearances, is a vast yoga of [Brahman] attempting to realize [his] perfection."[154]

Aurobindo holds that that the will guiding all actions is Brahman's. He explains that Brahman "uses the individual as . . . a means"[155] to make manifest divine qualities. "It is this vast [divine] impulse which the modern world, without quite knowing its own aim, yet serves in all its activities and labors subconsciously to fulfill,"[156] he writes. Thus, in his view, individuals *qua* distinct beings are not free, for

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[154] Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1988) 2.

[155] Aurobindo, *Life Divine* 16.

[156] Aurobindo, *Life Divine* 16.

their actions are determined by Brahman. But as individuals are ultimately one with Brahman, his will is their own, and in this sense Aurobindo will say they are free.

Aurobindo maintains that individuals can and inevitably will come to recognize this freedom. He claims certain kinds of extraordinary knowledge are possible for individuals. Telepathy, knowledge of what is inherently hidden, and knowledge of others' minds are all possible for us, though still with limitations.[157] But most important is knowledge of the identity of all things with Brahman.[158] With this knowledge "the external draws into oneness with the internal,"[159] as external objects and oneself are seen as one. At this point, the individual ego dissolves and identity with Brahman is fully realized.

> There [in this realization] is the central throne of the cosmic knowledge looking out on her widest dominion; there the empire of oneself with the empire of one's world; there the life in the eternally consummate being and the realization of his divine nature in our human existence.[160]

Aurobindo holds that this divine nature is veiled for much of man's evolution. *Yoga-māyā*, Brahman's creative power, generates illusion in the minds of individual selves, making them see themselves as separate beings.[161] With time and further evolution, individuals outgrow their delusion and come to see themselves as belonging

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[157] Aurobindo, *Life Divine* 479.

[158] Aurobindo, *Life Divine* 15-16, 414-15.

[159] Aurobindo, *Life Divine* 16.

[160] Aurobindo, *Life Divine* 16.

[161] Aurobindo, *Life Divine* 108.

to inseparable unity. Aurobindo sees illusion as finite, not an abiding condition of the phenomenal world, as Śaṅkara thinks.

While Aurobindo holds that "all life is . . . yoga,"[162] he does acknowledge a special value in systematic yoga practice. It can take one to liberation more quickly than the activities of everyday life, he maintains. In his reading of the *Gītā* he distinguishes *karma yoga*, *jñāna yoga*, and *bhakti yoga* as three distinct steps of yoga practice.[163] He describes these steps as follows. *Karma yoga* is the first. He defines it as sacrifice of all inner and outer activities to God. It culminates in the renunciation of desire and prepares the practitioner for *jñāna yoga*. Contemplation of the true nature of the self is *jñāna yoga*. It leads to realization of the true nature of the self and abandonment of the belief that one is the agent of one's actions. *Jñāna yoga* paves the way for *bhakti yoga*, surrender of the whole being into unity with the divine. *Bhakti yoga* is the final stage of evolution, the letting go of all illusion of separateness. This step brings the realization that one participates, through all action, in divine work.

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[162] Aurobindo, *Synthesis* 2.

[163] Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1959) 49.

Chapter 2

The problem of free will in the Gītā

The *Gītā* contains several verses that seem *prima facie* to deny free will. For example, *BG* 3.27 reads:

> Actions are performed, in all cases,
> by the *guṇa*-s of *prakṛti*.
> One who is deceived by self-conceit
> thinks 'I am the doer'. (*BG* 3.27)

BG 3.5, 3.28, 5.8-9, 14.19, and 18.40 make similar statements. If the *guṇa*-s are understood as material and if it is assumed that they obey strict causal laws then such verses read as statements of determinism.

At the same time, other verses in the *Gītā* seem to affirm freedom. For example, a theory of action given in *BG* 18.12-15 states that an agent is necessary though not in itself sufficient for action. It presents the agent as distinct from the body and mind. It seems to imply freedom.

The very occasion for the *Gītā*'s teachings requires freedom in the sense of choice and self-determination. The *Gītā* begins with a moral dilemma: ought Arjuna engage in war or spare his cousins? It seems he has alternatives and cannot decide between them. In Chapter 11, Krishna shows Arjuna that his cousins will certainly die as all mortals must. He asks Arjuna to be his instrument in bringing about their deaths (*BG* 11.33). This request would be meaningless if Arjuna could not choose to agree or refuse.

What counts most in favor of a voluntarist reading of the *Gītā* is that it is a yogic text. Krishna's chief concerns are instructing Arjuna in yoga and encouraging him to practice. The possibility of practice rests on human freedom. Effort and choice are intrinsic to practice and freedom is the ability to make effort and choose. The *Gītā*, as a yogic text, requires a voluntarist reading.

Krishna is explicit in affirming effort (*BG* 6.36, 12.5) and control (*BG* 2.61, 6.36, 8.2, 12.14). What is more, he portrays yoga as a means to extraordinary control such as the ability to withdraw the senses from their objects (*BG* 2.58).

Krishna recognizes that "some practitioners practice sacrifice to a god" (*BG* 4.25), "others offer the activity of the senses into the fire of yogic self-restraint" (*BG* 4.27), while others recite the Vedas or control their breathing as forms of sacrifice (*BG* 4.28-29). On the other hand, wicked people do not practice at all, following their own inclinations instead of scriptural injunctions (*BG* 16.23). What seems implied here is that wicked people make the wrong choice. While Krishna teaches *karma yoga*, he acknowledges that a variety of paths exist from which a practitioner may choose.

In *BG* 12.8-11, Krishna offers Arjuna a set of yogic options. They seem to represent a range of *karma yoga* variants that differ according to difficulty. Arjuna is to choose from them based on his ability.

> Fix your thoughts on me alone,
> resting your mind on me.
> You will then dwell in me,
> there is no doubt. (*BG* 12.8)
> But, if you are not able
> to fix a steady mind on me,
> then seek to reach me
> through yoga practice, O [Arjuna]. (*BG* 12.9)
> But, if you not able to practice,

be intent on my work.
Working toward my ends in action, too,
you will achieve success. (*BG* 12.10)
But if you cannot do that either,
then take refuge in my power.
The fruits of action abandoned,
act, then, with self-restraint. (*BG* 12.11)

Krishna allows Arjuna to assess his own ability and practice accordingly. Effort and choice are suggested in Krishna's offering this set of options.

Adolf Janáček argues that voluntarism is suggested in the *Yogasūtra* by what it recognizes as obstacles to yoga.[1] The obstacles it lists, states such as laziness, indecision, carelessness, and shakiness of limb, are all "volitional opposites."[2] Similarly, states such as trembling and sinking of the limbs (*BG* 1.29), having a wandering mind (*BG* 1.30), and being confused about what is obligatory (*BG* 2.7) are obstacles to Arjuna's carrying out his duty on the battlefield. As Janáček points out, taking such states as obstacles suggests voluntarism.

The practical orientation of the *Gītā* requires that the few verses that seem deterministic be interpreted as consistent with an assumption of freedom. This is what I will to do.

Treatment of free will in Gītā *scholarship East and West*

[1] Stephen H. Phillips, "The Conflict of Voluntarism and Dualism in the *Yogasūtra*," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 13 (1985): 399-414.

[2] Phillips "Conflict of Voluntarism," 401.

Western *Gītā* scholars who have considered the question of free will argue that certain metaphysical elements of the text imply determinism and conclude that yoga involves realizing that freedom is illusory. Eliot Deutsch, Robert Minor, George Teschner, and Simon Brodbeck all do this and offer similar arguments. I let Teschner represent the group as he makes the lengthiest and most thorough arguments. I present his work later in this chapter.

Indian commentators recognize the free-will problem and devote to it more careful consideration. Rāmānuja, Abhinavagupta, and Aurobindo give readings of the *Gītā* that attempt to balance deterministic sentiment with a commitment to some form of freedom.

Only Śaṅkara of the great classical commentators denies freedom altogether. He is forced to do so by his non-dual, illusionist metaphysics. In his view, the human self is not other than Brahman, the One, and all apparent distinctions are illusory. Bodies, external objects, and actions are mere appearances with no underlying reality. Freedom is an illusion in a world of illusions.

Abhinavagupta holds an idealist view in which individual selves and objects exist like dream images in the consciousness of Lord Śiva. Unlike the images of dreams, they obey causal laws. Abhinavagupta explains that Śiva's creative activity is like "the circulating motion of the potter's wheel under the stick."[3] That is, worldly events are fully determined. An ordinary person's actions count as worldly events and are performed "mechanically, as by a puppet."[4] But Abhinavagupta holds that genuine freedom is possible through yoga. As I discussed in Chapter 1, Abhinavagupta explains human individuality as based on five conditions generated by Śiva that give

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[3] Abhinavagupta, *Abhinavagupta: Gītārthasaṅgraha*, trans. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1983) 141.

[4] Abhinavagupta, *Gītārthasaṅgraha* 119.

rise to the perception of time, limitation of cognitive ability, notions of what ought to be done, desire, and intention. The self which transcends these conditions realizes himself as identical to Śiva and achieves Śiva's genuine freedom and boundless creative ability.

It takes some work to determine Rāmānuja's position on freedom. He reads *BG* 3.27-29, 5.8-9, and 14.19 as attributing all behavior to the *guṇa*-s which he takes to be psychological factors that obey deterministic laws. However, he affirms agency in other portions of his commentary. On *BG* 13.22 he writes that the self (*ātman*) rules the body and freely "directs the senses."[5] In his commentary on *BG* 18.13 he calls the self the agent of action.

Rāmānuja seems to be aware of the tension between claiming the *guṇa*-s determine action and calling the self an agent. In his commentary on *BG* 14.19 he explains: "The self, pure [that is, passive] in nature by itself, gains agency by contact with the *guṇa*-s springing from past [action]."[6] That is, the embodied self only has agency due to contact with the *guṇa*-s. In his view, the *guṇa*-s ultimately determine action, not the self. He writes that there is "no agent of action other than the *guṇa*-s . . . the *guṇa*-s are themselves the agents according to their nature."[7] The self has agency vicariously through them. The self is merely a witness that takes itself for an agent when, in contact with a body, it is privy to inner states that cause action. The intimate relationship the self has with these states makes it easy to identify with them, but in this the self is mistaken.

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[5] Śrī Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya*, trans. Swami Adidevananda (Mylapore: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2001) 559.

[6] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 650.

[7] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 475.

This conclusion is not made prominent in Rāmānuja's commentary. It only emerges with careful reading. Cyril Veliath sees Rāmānuja grappling with the problem of agency but does not recognize the commitment I take Rāmānuja to eventually make. Veliath finds that Rāmānuja makes contradictory statements in the *Gītā Bhāṣya* (*GB*) about the locus of agency. He cites Rāmānuja as stating that *prakṛti* (material nature, for Rāmānuja) brings about all actions (*GB* 5.14), that the individual self is the source and originator of all action (*GB* 13.20, 18.14-16), and that God is the originator of all action, using individual souls as his instruments (*GB* 3.32, 18.12-13). Ultimately, Veliath charges,

> Rāmānuja has not provided us with a satisfactory answer to the question as to who is the real agent of actions . . . . He appears to be caught between his desire to preserve the purity of the Brahman, and the responsibility of the human person for his acts.[8]

Rāmānuja does seem reluctant to deny either horn of his dilemma. I see him as eventually affirming determinism. Still, because he does not make this conclusion prominent, his commitment to it seems weak.

In his *Essays on the Gita*, Aurobindo takes the *guṇa*-s as energies that constitute all natural things and obey deterministic laws. He holds that behavior of the body and mind is fully determined, while the self is passive.[9] "A man is what his nature has made him and cannot do otherwise than as his nature compels him."[10] At

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[8] Cyril Veliath, *The Mysticism of Rāmānuja* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1993) 136.

[9] Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1959) 48. Note that this view seems to be contradicted in Auribindo's *The Life Divine*.

[10] Aurobindo, *Essays* 293.

the same time, he insists that there is a sense in which the self is free. He asserts that while an individual's behavior is absolutely determined, absolute freedom is another aspect of the self's relationship to nature.[11] He articulates a form of compatibilism in his reading of the *Gītā*.

The self has absolute freedom, in Aurobindo's view, in being distinct from mental and bodily events. He explains that the self may realize this freedom by disidentifying with the body and mind.[12] While want and pain, for example, may be present, the self that refuses taking them as his own achieves a certain sort of freedom from them. This freedom is significant from that self's perspective. For while desires and pain be present they do not cause him suffering.

Elsewhere in his *Essays* Aurobindo struggles to establish real freedom for the self in its relationship to a body and mind bound by causal laws. He writes that while some people act on compulsion, in others the self approves or disapproves behavior. In such people the body and mind are the executive powers of the self.[13] Aurobindo does not want this enhanced status of the self to land him in the libertarian camp though. He makes an awkward attempt to find some middle ground when he writes "nine-tenths of our freedom of will is palpable fiction."[14] This qualification suggests that freedom is real though severely limited.

While the commentators are concerned with the issue of freedom, none of them attributes a robust enough sense of freedom to the *Gītā*. Their work is not of much help to me in my project of developing a libertarian reading of the text.

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[11] Aurobindo, *Essays* 287.

[12] Robert Minor also attributes this view of freedom to the Gītā. Robert N. Minor, *The Bhagavad-Gītā: An Exegetical Commentary* (New Delhi: Heritage, 1982) 490-01.

[13] Aurobindo, *Essays* 298, 308.

[14] Aurobindo, *Essays* 299.

I proceed next to some notions basic to the free-will debate in Western philosophy so that my reading of the *Gītā* may be accessible to a Western audience. Then I examine Teschner's view and show that it is flawed because of the interpretation of the *guṇa*-s he makes. Careful examination of the passages of the *Gītā* that discuss the *guṇa*-s establishes what I think is the correct understanding of the *Gītā*'s use of the term. Finally, I offer a libertarian reading of the *Gītā* that solves the *prima facie* problem of free will.

Notions basic to the free will debate in the West

Robert Kane, in *Free Will*, discusses notions important to the debate about free will in Western philosophy.

According to Kane, free will may be understood in a variety of ways: being free from coercion or manipulation by others, action being up to oneself, the sources of action being in oneself, having open alternatives in action, and having been able to do otherwise.[15]

Kane provides a general definition of determinism. "Any event is determined . . . just in case it must be the case that given the determining conditions . . . the event will occur."[16]

Kane explains that determinism threatens free will in two ways. First, if an event must be the case, then the event is not up to the agent, and there are no open alternatives. Second, if the sources of one's actions are in something outside oneself

[15] Robert Kane, ed., *Free Will* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2002) 3.

[16] Kane, *Free Will* 5.

(namely, the determining conditions), then the sources of one's actions are not in oneself.[17]

Only the first notion of free will, being free from coercion or manipulation by others, is compatible with determinism. Hume and other compatibilists hold that one is free when there is an "absence of constraint or impediments preventing us from doing what we want to do."[18] Or, in Hume's words, liberty is only "a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will," which belongs to anyone "who is not a prisoner in chains."[19]

Compatibilists hold that one's desires and consequent behavior may be determined by things outside oneself (such as upbringing, physiology, and so on), but one is free as long as one is able to act on one's desires. Kane calls such freedom "surface freedom," and distinguishes it from "metaphysical freedom" which he identifies with the latter senses of freedom listed above such as action being up to oneself and one having open alternatives in action.

I will refer to the first sense of freedom above as "freedom in a Humean sense." I use "free will" or "genuine freedom," in contrast, to refer to what Kane calls "metaphysical freedom."

George Teschner's determinist interpretation

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[17] Kane, *Free Will* 5.

[18] Kane, *Free Will* 11.

[19] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) 95.

George Teschner maintains that Krishna is a determinist. He argues that determinism is entailed by the *Gītā*'s metaphysics. But his approach to understanding the *Gītā*'s metaphysics is misguided. He lets his understanding of the terms *puruṣa*, *prakṛti*, and *guṇa* as used in the *Gītā* be supplied by another text, the *Sāṃkhyakārika* (*SK*). He assumes that use of these terms in the *Gītā* indicates that the latter holds metaphysical views akin to those of the Sāṃkhya school, but he is wrong.

The *SK* espouses a dualist metaphysics with two types of entity: *puruṣa*, or consciousness, and *prakṛti*, or material nature. In the Sāṃkhya view, there is a plurality of *puruṣa*-s with each *puruṣa* possessing a body and mind. The *puruṣa* is held to be an unchanging, passive witness to mental and bodily events. *Prakṛti* is characterized as non-conscious, changing, and active.

According to Sāṃkhya cosmogony, the conjunction of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* stimulates *prakṛti* to evolve into *buddhi* or *mahat* (intelligence), *ahaṃkāra* (sense of self), *manas* (mind), the five perceptual capacities (hearing, touching, seeing, tasting, and smelling), the five action capacities (speaking, grasping, movement, excreting, and procreating), the five subtle elements (sound, contact, form, taste, and smell), and the five gross elements (space, wind, fire, water, and earth). These evolutes together with *puruṣa* and *mūlāprakṛti* (original, unevolved *prakṛti*) are the twenty-five ontological principles recognized by Sāṃkhya (*SK* 22-32).[20]

The SK describes *prakṛti* as constituted by the three *guṇa*-s of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, which are material but permit of great subtlety. Each *guṇa* has characteristic functions. *Sattva* illuminates and gives rise to pleasure, *rajas* excites and gives rise to pain, and *tamas* restrains and gives rise to delusion (*SK* 12). According to J. N. Mohanty, the *guṇa*-s of the SK are best understood as "feeling

[20] J. N. Mohanty, *Classical Indian Philosophy* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000) 51.

substances,"[21] or "affective components."[22] They are material and affective at the same time, allowing the theory to account for physical and mental events, emotions, and moral qualities, all of which are prakṛtic, or natural (*SK* 12).

The *SK* also describes the *guṇa*-s as inseparable and existing in everything in combination. It explains that they underlie all phenomena in different amounts and combinations, and account for all apparent diversity (*SK* 12, 13, 15, 16). This view is called *guṇapariṇāma* (transformation of the *guṇa*-s).[23]

The *SK* takes the *guṇa*-s as mutually dependent in their activity. It holds that the characteristic functions of a *guṇa* is realized only when that *guṇa* dominates over the other two. For example, *sattva* alone does not produce pleasure. It produces pleasure only when *rajas* and *tamas* are present in an object but in lesser quantities than *sattva* (*SK* 12).

According to the Sāṃkhya view, *prakṛti* is the domain to which the mind and body belong. Under this view, action belongs to the body and mind alone and is fully determined by the *guṇa*-s. The *puruṣa* is called a non-agent (*SK* 10, 19, 20). [24] However, because of the conjunction of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, *puruṣa* appears to have agency and *prakṛti* appears to be sentient (*SK* 20). In truth what is sentient, *puruṣa*, is inactive and what is active, *prakṛti*, is insentient.

The goal of yoga, according to Sāṃkhya, is to realize this truth and achieve disidentification of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. Disidentification amounts to *puruṣa* turning

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[21] Surendra Nath Dasgupta, *Philosophical Essays* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1941) 187.

[22] Mohanty, *Classical Indian Philosophy* 5.

[23] E. H. Johnston, *Early Sāṃkhya: An Essay on its Historical Development According to the Texts* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974) 25.

[24] Radhanath Phukan, *The Sāṃkhya Kārika of Īśvarakṛṣṇa* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1960) 82, 96-98.

away from *prakṛti*, or withdrawing awareness from all worldly events, including those of one's own body and mind. Upon disidentification, *puruṣa* witnesses only itself.

Teschner takes verses like *BG* 3.27 to straightforwardly express the determinism entailed by such a metaphysics.

Teschner refers to the theory of the *dehin* (embodied one) in the second chapter of the *Gītā* to support his view. The *dehin*, or embodied *puruṣa*, is described as immortal and unchangeable even though the body can change and be killed. The view is captured in *BG* 2.20 and 2.25:

> Never is this born, never does it die.
> Never will this become, having come to be,
> not come to be anymore.
> This is unborn, eternal, constant, and primeval.
> Even when the body is killed, this is not killed.
> (*BG* 2.20)
> This is imperceptible, this is unthinkable,
> this is immutable, so it is said.
> Therefore, knowing thusly
> you should not grieve. (*BG* 2.25)

Teschner cites this passage in support of his view that "action is not conscious, but is governed by the attributes of material nature, and consciousness does not act, but is the eternal non-doer."[25]

However, Krishna's teaching about the *dehin* does not indicate determinism. It may be consistent with a determinist reading of the text, but what Teschner needs to show is that such a reading is right.

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[25] George Teschner, "Anxiety, Anger and the Concept of Agency and Action in the Bhagavad Gita," *Asian Philosophy* 2.1 (1992) 5.

Teschner tries further to support his determinist reading of the *Gītā* by pointing to *BG* 4.13:

> The four classes were created by me
> according to their shares of *guṇa*-s and actions.
> Though I am the doer of that,
> know me as the imperishable non-doer. (*BG* 4.13)

Teschner writes "even Krishna admits to being a non-doer."[26] He argues that even God's behavior is determined by the *guṇa*-s. This goes much too far. The idea that God's behavior may be determined by his creation is absurd in its incompatibility with the understanding of God developed in the *Gītā*. Further, Teschner's reading of this verse shows carelessness, for while Krishna calls himself a 'non-doer' he also calls himself a 'doer'. Teschner simply ignores this latter assertion.

Teschner's main problem is that he turns to the *SK* to understand terms used in the *Gītā* when he should look to the *Gītā* itself.

The guṇa-*s in early Sāṃkhya*

The terms *puruṣa*, *prakṛti*, and *guṇa*, used in several ancient and classical texts, are first given systematic philosophical treatment in the *SK*, Sāṃkhya's foundational text. Krishna attributes portions of his teaching to Sāṃkhya. Teschner makes the leap that the Sāṃkhya to which Krishna refers is the Sāṃkhya of the *SK*.

This is a mistake. The *Gītā*, probably composed somewhere between the 6th and 2nd centuries BCE, belongs to what scholars of Sāṃkhya consider early

[26] Teschner, "Anxiety, Anger and the Concept of Agency and Action in the *BG*" 7.

Sāṃkhya.[27] The scholarly consensus is that early Sāṃkhya is not a single system of thought but consists in a variety of related proto-theories found in a handful of texts. There is no one, well-developed view of the *guṇa*-s that can be attributed to early Sāṃkhya. The *SK* appeared later. Composed as early as the beginning of the 3rd century CE[28] and as late as the 6th century CE,[29] this text belongs to what scholars identify as the classical Sāṃkhya period.

Teschner commits a fallacy of anachronism when he takes the *guṇa*-s of the *Gītā* to be those of the *SK*.[30]

Scholars of Sāṃkhya show that there are several key metaphysical commitments of Classical Sāṃkhya that the *Gītā* does not share. According to E. H. Johnston, *guṇapariṇāma* does not appear in the *Gītā*.[31] He is right. Furthermore, there are no verses that clearly give the *guṇa*-s a role in the *Gītā*'s metaphysics.

The *SK* affirms a view of causation called *satkaryavāda*, the view that effects pre-exist in their causes "like curds in milk" (*SK* 9). Under this view, production is

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[27] Johnston, *Early Sāṃkhya* 4-11; Gerald Larson, *Classical Sāṃkhya: An Interpretation of its History and Meaning* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979) 73.

[28] Mohanty, *Classical Indian Philosophy* 154.

[29] Larson, *Classical Sāṃkhya* 43.

[30] This seems to be a common mistake among scholars of Indian Philosophy. See Dasgupta, *Philosophical Essays* 187; Franklin Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, Harvard Oriental Series vol. 38-39 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994) 40; Mohanty, *Classical Indian Philosophy* 5; R. C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gītā* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) 15. Stephen Phillips avoids this error, recognizing that "Sāṃkhya finds several early formulations both in the Upanishads and in the *Gītā*." Stephen H. Phillips *Classical Indian Metaphysics* (Chicago: Open Court) 1995, 26.

[31] Johnston, *Early Sāṃkhya* 25.

just the redistribution of *guṇa*-s into combinations consisting of new proportions of each *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. This view seems to entail determinism.

Johnston points out that *satkaryavāda* does not appear in the *Gītā*.[32] What is more, the text does not offer any account of causation.

Johnston writes that the use of the word *guṇa* in the *Gītā* is "puzzling."[33] He thinks the term is used in the first twelve chapters of the *Gītā* to refer to moral and psychological conditions and from the thirteenth chapter on to mean 'material factor' in the same sense as in the *SK*.[34] Gerald Larson holds that the sense of *guṇa* throughout the *Gītā* is that of moral and psychological conditions but writes "at points . . . the *guṇa*-s seem to constitute the very nature of *prakṛti*" as in the *SK*.[35] Larson also cites verses in the last third of the text (*BG* 13.21-23, and 14.5-10, 19-20) in support of this suggestion.

If Johnston and Larson are right then the views of Teschner stand. It is easy enough to evaluate Johnston's and Larson's suggestions. As it turns out, the only substantive discussions of the *guṇa*-s in the *Gītā* are found in the last third of the text in *BG* 14.5-24, 17.2-22, 18.5-9, and 18.19-44.[36] While it is here that Johnston and Larson think the *Gītā*'s *guṇa*-s seem most like those of the *SK*, I will show that these passages depict the *guṇa*-s as strictly psychological. The *guṇa*-s of the *Gītā*, I will conclude, are not the *guṇa*-s of the *SK*.

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[32] Johnston, *Early Sāṃkhya* 25.

[33] Johnston, *Early Sāṃkhya* 31.

[34] Johnston, *Early Sāṃkhya* 31.

[35] Larson, *Classical Sāṃkhya* 129.

[36] Zaehner, *Bhagavad-Gītā* 15. According to Zaehner, these passages provide the best account of the *guṇa*-s anywhere in early classical literature.

The guṇa *theory of the* Gītā

Of the terms *puruṣa*, *prakṛti*, and *guṇa* the *Gītā* devotes the most attention to discussion of the latter. Extensive treatment of the *guṇa*-s is found in *BG* 14.11-17, 17.2-22, and 18.19-44. The *guṇa*-s are frequently mentioned elsewhere but in contexts not rich enough to indicate much about their nature. Examination of *BG* 14.11-17, 17.2-22, and 18.19-44 shows, I argue, that Krishna considers the *guṇa*-s sets of personality traits, affect, and behaviors.

BG 14.11-17 discuss the dominance of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. Dominance of *sattva* is indicated by knowledge, *rajas* by activity, unrest, and greed, and *tamas* by inactivity and negligence. 'Negligence' probably refers to failure to perform obligatory duties. *BG* 14.9-17 list effects of the dominance each of the *guṇa*-s. Dominance of *sattva* results in knowledge and rebirth in "stainless worlds" among those with knowledge. Dominance of *rajas* results in desire, pain, and rebirth among those attached to action. Dominance of *tamas* results in ignorance, delusion, and rebirth by a deluded mother.

From *BG* 14.11-17 it remains unclear what kind of things *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* are and what it means for them to be dominant. Note, however, that most of the items named as their indicators and effects are psychological in a broad sense of the latter that includes the mental, moral, affective, and behavioral. The *guṇa*-s have as indicators and effects cognitive states (knowledge, ignorance, and delusion), desiderative states (greed and desire), a moral quality (negligence), behaviors or behavioral states (activity, inactivity, and unrest), a feeling (pain), and various stations one may achieve in rebirth.

Also note that the passage states that activity is a sign of *rajas*. This asserts that where there is activity, there is *rajas*. It does not mean that where there is *rajas*

there will necessarily be activity. The passage does not state that *rajas* causes activity. And in fact, activity is nowhere called an effect of *rajas*.

BG 17.2-22 and 18.19-44 categorize people as sattvic, rajasic, or tamasic according to the type of religious observance they perform (*BG* 17.2-4), their taste in food (*BG* 17.8-10), and the kind of agent they are (*BG* 18.26-28). For example,

> The sattvic worship the gods,
> the rajasic the benevolent semi-divine *yakṣa*-s and evil
> *rakṣa*-s,
> and others, the tamasic people,
> worship the dead and a host of ghosts. *(BG* 17.4)
> Promoting vigor, purity, will power, health,
> happiness, and pleasure,
> juicy, smooth, firm, and pleasant to the stomach,
> such foods are favored by the sattvic. (*BG* 17.8)

Also considered sattvic, rajasic, or tamasic are types of personal discipline (*BG* 17.14-19), religious sacrifice (*BG* 17.4, 11-13), gifts (*BG* 17.20-22), knowledge (*BG* 18.20-22), action (*BG* 18.23-25), moral judgment (*buddhi*) (*BG* 18.30-32), resolve (*dhṛti*) (*BG* 18.33-35), and happiness (*sukha*) (*BG* 18.37-39). For example,

> But that gift which is given to return a favor,
> or just for the outcome,
> and with reluctance,
> is thought to be rajasic. (*BG* 17.21)
> That happiness which, at first and subsequently,
> is the confusion of the self,
> causing sleepiness, sloth, and carelessness,
> is declared to be tamasic. (*BG* 18.39)

Thus people, cognitive states, mental faculties, moral faculties, dispositions, goals, deeds, and emotions can be sattvic, rajasic, or tamasic. In these lengthy passages, the *guṇa*-s are used as categories.

Winthrop Sargeant considers the *guṇa*-s categories. He writes in a footnote to *BG* 14.10 that the *guṇa*-s are "three types of personality, or three phases of behavior."[37] The are used as *guṇa*-s, but taking them as such makes it difficult to interpret passage in which the *guṇa*-s seem to be considered entities.

Krishna implies the *guṇa*-s are states in speaking of their causes and effects. As we saw in BG 14.9-17, one's station in rebirth is caused by the dominance of a particular *guṇa*. BG 14.6-9 explain that each *guṇa* causes attachment to certain psychological states and thereby "binds" one. The passages states that *sattva* binds a person with attachment to knowledge and happiness, and *rajas* to work, while *tamas* binds with negligence, indolence, and sleep (*BG* 14.6-8). To bind, in this context, is to keep a person involved in the cycle of corporeal life, death, and rebirth.

Krishna says less about causes of the *guṇa*-s. *BG* 14.7 may mean that desire and attachment cause *rajas*.

> Know that *rajas* is characterized by passion.
> It [arises from or is the source of] thirst and attachment.
> It binds down the embodied, O Arjuna,
> by attachment to *karman* (*BG* 14.7)

It is not clear whether *rajas* arises from desire and attachment or is the source of the latter. *BG* 14.8 states that ignorance causes *tamas*.

> But know that *tamas* is born of ignorance,
> confusing all embodied beings.
> It binds, O Arjuna,

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[37] Winthrop Sargeant, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, ed. Christopher Chapple Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984) 572.

by carelessness, lethargy, and sleepiness. (*BG* 14.8)

Based on examination of *BG* 14.11-17, 17.2-22, and 18.19-44, I suggest we take *guṇa*-s as sets of psychological features, where the psychological is broadly construed to include the mental, moral, affective, and behavioral. When Krishna seems to talk about a *guṇa* as an entity, I suggest he has in mind the states, faculties, and other features that belong to that *guṇa* as a set. For example, when he says that *sattva* causes attachment to virtue, we should take this to mean that the features that belong to the sattvic set cause attachment to virtue. At other times, Krishna uses the *guṇa*-s as categories and we can understand those categories as the sets to which certain states and so on belong. We can understand dominance of a *guṇa* as the prevalence of the states and so on that belong to that *guṇa* as a set.

Health, happiness, knowledge, virtue, and unselfishness exemplify the sattvic. Sickness, pain, desire, attachment, and selfishness exemplify the rajasic. Sloth, sleepiness, ignorance, confusion, negligence, and carelessness exemplify the tamasic.

Action is sattvic, rajasic, or tamasic depending on the agent's motivation.

Sattvic action is obligatory action performed without desire (*BG* 18.23). Rajasic action is action done out of desire for the fruit (result) of action (*BG* 18.24). Finally, tamasic behavior is irrational, done out of compulsion and without regard for consequences, even personal injury (*BG* 18.22, 25). The behavior of an addict, for example, is tamasic.

Note that not all obligatory action is sattvic. The same obligatory act may be sattvic, rajasic, or tamasic, depending on why it is done.

In Chapter 18 the reason for sattvic action is described only negatively. Sattvic action is not done from desire. *BG* 17.11 and 20 suggest that sattvic action is done because it ought to be done. *BG* 17.11 states that sattvic sacrifice is made by concentrating the mind on the thought "this ought to be sacrificed" (*yaṣṭavyam eveti*),

and *BG* 17.20 that the sattvic gift is given with the thought "this ought to be given" (*dātavyam iti*).

If this is correct, then sattvic action is performed out of a sense of duty, rajasic from desire, and tamasic from delusion. But this is an idealized picture which Krishna most likely presents as a teaching tool. Actual reasons for action may be mixed, including duty, desire, and delusion together.

Arjuna, who represents the new yoga practitioner, exhibits sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic attributes in the *Gītā*'s Chapter 1. His interest in his doing his duty is sattvic, his desire not to kill his kin rajasic, and his inactivity when he slumps down in the chariot tamasic. According to *BG* 14.10, this is normal.

> *Sattva* exists, O Arjuna,
> prevailing over *rajas* and *tamas*,
> *rajas* over *sattva* and *tamas*,
> and *tamas* over *sattva* and *rajas*. (*BG* 14.10)

I understand this to mean that one possesses a variety of sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic features at all times, with one type being prominent. The particular combination makes up one's personality.

The *guṇa* theory is compatible with choice. Sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic states such as sense of duty, desire, and delusion give an agent reasons to act but do not cause him to act. Even compulsion, a tamasic state, does not cause an agent to act. The person in whom *tamas* is dominant still possesses sattvic and rajasic states and therefore still has sattvic and rajasic reasons to act.

BG 3.5 states that everyone is forced by the *guṇa*-s to engage in action (*karma kāryate*).

> No one ever, for a single instant,
> stands still as a non-doer.
> Indeed, everyone is caused to perform action,

even against his will, by the *guṇa*-s of [their] nature.
(*BG* 3.5)

This need not mean, as the determinists would have it, that all behavior is causally determined by the *guṇa*-s. The verse recognizes the existence of will with the phrase "even against his will."

I take this verse to mean that the states, faculties, and affects that belong to *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* cause an agent to act in the sense that those states and so on gives reasons for action from which the ordinary agent must choose. Though Krishna speaks of 'everyone', he only means ordinary agents here, for some agents transcend the *guṇa*-s and still act. I show why in Chapter 4. Krishna uses 'everyone' and 'this whole world' in other places where he must mean to refer only to ordinary agents. For example, in *BG* 7.13 Krishna says "this whole world is confused . . . they do not recognize me." He does not mean 'whole world' literally, for elsewhere he acknowledges that there are yoga practitioners who live in the world and yet do recognize him (*BG* 14.19). By 'whole world' he means the workaday world, the world of ordinary people. This is what he means by 'everyone' in *BG* 3.5.

BG 3.6 makes it explicit that there is no such thing as not acting. The ascetic who sits without moving is still acting. He restrains his powers of action (*karmendriyāṇi saṃyama*), but such restraint is a form of action. Action requires a reason, and I take *BG* 3.6 to mean that for ordinary people the *guṇa*-s provide reasons. And because they provide a number of reasons, one cannot avoid choosing.

The three *guṇa*-s are portrayed elsewhere as swaying an agent (*BG* 3.34, 14.21-23). They have a certain pull on an agent, and I take it to be the pull of the reasons they generate. While this pull contributes to action, the agent is in principle free to resist. Krishna implies this repeatedly when he instructs Arjuna to resist desire.

The *Gītā*'s *guṇa* theory is a simple theory of psychology that establishes sets of mental states and faculties, moral states and faculties, affects, and behaviors. It

provides accounts of rational behavior and rebirth in terms of these sets of things. This theory is compatible with free will and furthermore implies it.

Nothing in *BG* 14.11-17, 17.2-22, or 18.19-44 indicates the Sāṃkhya view that the *guṇa*-s are the material constituents all natural phenomena. Rather, the *guṇa*-s are presented as having to do with the mind, morality, behavior, and rebirth. In the *Gītā*, *guṇa* theory is a theory of psychology, where the latter is taken broadly to include the mental, moral, behavioral, and experiential aspects of human nature.

A tenet of this theory is that rebirth is related to psychology in that the station one achieves in rebirth is determined by one's psychological make-up and conduct in previous lives.

The guṇa-*s and* prakṛti

Several verses in the *Gītā* refer to the *guṇa*-s "of *prakṛti*" or the *guṇa*-s "born of *prakṛti*" (*BG* 3.5, 3.27, 13.21, 14.5, 18.40). The *Gītā* does not define *prakṛti* and many interpreters have assumed it has the same sense in the *Gītā* as it does in classical Sāṃkhya (material nature constituted by the three *guṇa*-s). This is a mistake. The *guṇa*-s of the *Gītā* are not the *guṇa*-s of classical Sāṃkhya, and this is reason to think that the sense of *prakṛti* in the *Gītā* is also different.[38]

[38] There are other reasons to take the sense of *prakṛti* in the *Gītā* as different from its sense in the *SK*. First, when Krishna calls the individual selves God's *prakṛti*, he employs *prakṛti* in a way clearly inconsistent with classical Sāṃkhya. The selves are conscious and unchanging, while Sāṃkhya's *prakṛti* has the opposite qualities. Also, the *SK*'s *prakṛti* is twenty-fourfold, while God's lower *prakṛti* is eightfold, and his higher *prakṛti* one. Further, the constituents of *prakṛti* are fixed, according to classical Sāṃkhya, until yogic achievement results in disintegration of one's material nature. But according to the *Gītā*, while *ahaṃkāra* is ordinarily a constituent of human nature,

Krishna describes the *prakṛti* of human beings as the body, *buddhi* (judgment), *ahaṃkāra* (ego sense), *manas* (mind), senses, and modifications of these such as desire (*BG* 13.6). He says that God has two *prakṛti*-s, the material world and the set of all individual selves (*BG* 7.4-5). *Prakṛti* is something, first of all, that is possessed by a self.

I take *prakṛti* as used in the *Gītā* to mean 'nature' in the sense of the particular set of qualities belonging to a thing by virtue of its constitution. God's two *prakṛti*-s constitute his nature, and a person's body, mind, and their characteristic qualities and functions constitute her human nature. The "*guṇa*-s of *prakṛti*" are the states and faculties that can be categorized as sattvic, rajasic, or tamasic that constitute a person's psychological make-up and thus are part of her nature.

The puruṣa*, agency, and motivation*

The *SK* understands the *puruṣa* as pure consciousness, a mere witness to cognitive states and physical feelings with no involvement in action. However, Krishna calls the *puruṣa* a witness *and* a consenter (*anumantā*) (*BG* 13.22). I suggest that in the *Gītā* the *puruṣa* is taken to exercise agency in consenting to do a particular action for a particular reason, such as fighting the war out of desire for fame.

The *puruṣa* is not an unmoved mover. It does not move anything. Rather, its consent coordinates two sources of motivation. First, there is the pull of states like desire and knowledge of duty generated by the *guṇa*-s. These are necessary but not sufficient for action. Second, there is the push of bodily energy (*ojas*). According to *BG* 18.61:

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the realized yoga practitioner is without *ahaṃkāra* (*BG* 13.8, 13.11). A person's *prakṛti* can change in constitution, according to the *Gītā*.

The Lord abides in the hearts
of all beings, O Arjuna.
By his power he causes all beings,
riding on this support, to move.[39]

God causes beings to move by endowing their bodies with *ojas*, or energy.

And, pervading the sun,
I cause living beings to continue living by [endowing
them with] energy (*ojas*).
And I nourish all medicinal herbs
as *soma*, which constitutes their [healing] essence. (*BG* 15.13)

He does so as the process of digestion.

As the digestive fire,
I dwell in the bodies of living beings.
In contact with [other vital winds]
I digest the four kinds of food. (*BG* 15.14)

[39] Śrī Śaṅkarācarya, *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Alladi Mahadeva Sastri (Madras: Samata Books, 1995) 497. Śaṅkara interprets the second line of this verse as "like wooden dolls mounted on a machine" supplying 'wooden dolls', the comparative 'like', and taking *yantra* to mean machine. The result is an interpretation very much in line with his determinist project. Unfortunately, Rāmānuja, Sargeant, Minor, and others seem to have been influenced by Śaṅkara to read this verse along similar lines. However, the verse permits of other interpretations, and more literal ones at that. As I have said (in the Introduction), in my translation I attempt to stay as true to the text as possible by representing the most common meanings of terms and by not supplying anything conceptually significant. However, when alternative meanings are available and all relatively common, I choose what is most compatible with my reading, and hold to a principle of charity.

The energy provided by digestion is necessary but not sufficient for action. The claim made in *BG* 18.61 that God "causes all beings . . . to move" should be taken to mean that God supplies a necessary condition of voluntary motion.

I suggest the view that God endows people's bodies with *ojas*, or energy, a push, while reasons generated by the *guṇa*-s are pulls. These pushes and pulls are motivational, but are themselves insufficient for action. Action ensues when the agent, through consent, coordinates the push of bodily energy with the pull of a reason.

The agent is free. It is up to him to choose how to direct his God-given bodily motion. Choosing amounts to consenting to a reason for action and the end it entails.

Proponents of determinism take the claim in *BG* 18.61 that God "causes all beings . . . to move" to mean that God provides sufficient conditions of movement and thus determines action. They commonly cite this verse as support for their position. But what about the *guṇa*-s? Brodbeck comes to the awkward conclusion that action is causally determined by both the *guṇa*-s and God together, though he cannot say how. Deutsch sees the *guṇa* theory and Divine rulership as two "interrelated" denials of free will.[40] However, he does not say how they are interrelated. Robert Minor makes the most sense: "all is Krishna and under his control," including of course the *guṇa*-s, and therefore "the logical conclusion . . . is a determinism."[41]

Brodbeck and the others are wrong to take *BG* 18.61 as unequivocal support for their determinist reading, for the claim that God "causes all beings . . . to move" may well mean that God establishes necessary but not sufficient conditions for motion.

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[40] Simon Brodbeck, "Calling Kṛṣṇa's Bluff: Non-Attached Action in the Bhagavadgītā" *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32.1 (2004): 92; Eliot Deutsch, *The Bhagavad Gita* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968) 181.

[41] Minor, *Bhagavad-Gītā* 490.

As I argue above, features of the text that seem to indicate voluntarism greatly outweigh those that seem to indicate determinism. *BG* 18.61 should be interpreted in light of the text's overall voluntarist tone.

Three forms of agent causation

The account of motivation I propose attributes a form of agent causation to the *Gītā*. To better understand the *Gītā*'s agent causation, I compare it with the forms of agent causation articulated by Roderick Chisholm and Timothy O'Connor.

Chisholm holds a form of agent causation in which: 1. an agent is not an event, that is, is uncaused; 2. an agent causes events; and 3. an agent does so as a prime mover unmoved.[42] Chisholm defines two kinds of causation. The first is transuent causation, in which an event is caused by an event, which itself is caused. The second is immanent causation in which an event is caused by a non-event. Agents cause events by immanent causation.

J. David Velleman worries that Chisholm's view deviates from "our scientific view of the world [which] regards all events and states of affairs as caused, and hence explained, by other events and states."[43] He takes it as a rule that events are the basic elements of explanation and rejects immanent causation.

Velleman may be right, there may be no place for non-events in our modern-day scientific world view. However, non-events are highly significant in the *Gītā*'s

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[42] Roderick Chisholm, *Human Freedom and the Self* (University of Kansas, 1964) 7-12.

[43] J. David Velleman, "What Happens When Someone Acts?" *Mind* 101.403 (1992) 467.

explanations of things. Krishna is not an event. He is uncaused, eternal, and unchanging, according to Chapters 10 and 11. *Puruṣa*-s are not events. They are also unborn and eternal, according to *BG* 2.20. *BG* 2.25 states outright that the *puruṣa* is immutable. It is not subject to causation. At the same time, God and *puruṣa*-s are agents. The *Gītā* agrees with Chisholm on his first point that an agent is not an event.

It agrees with him on his second point that agents cause events. However, *puruṣa*-s cause events as part of a set of conditions that are sufficient to cause action. This set includes the *ojas* (energy), reasons, and the *puruṣa*'s consent. Chisholm's agent, on the other hand, is alone sufficient to cause action.

Agent causation in the *Gītā* further differs with Chisholm on his third point. The *puruṣa* does not cause action by producing movement. Like a king, the *puruṣa* causes action by granting consent. The king is dependent on his advisors to recommend courses of action; likewise, the *puruṣa* is free to choose only from reasons presented by the *guṇa*-s. This is passive in that the *puruṣa* itself does not generate motion. It is causal in that the consent of the *puruṣa* belongs to a set of conditions that are together sufficient for action. The *puruṣa*'s efficacy is like that of the king. The king's power rests on an agreement by his subjects to obey him. Likewise, the *puruṣa* is called the inner ruler of the body, mind, and senses, and its efficacy depends on the proper functioning of these faculties.

O'Connor criticizes Chisholm for making the agent "god-like" and "utterly unfettered."[44] In Chisholm's view, only the agent has power to trigger voluntary movement. He does not recognize a person's reasons for action as having any motive power. O'Connor thinks that, while we are free, our reasons move us to act. He asks: "How can agents cause things to happen without its being true that they do so in virtue

[44] Timothy O'Connor, "The Agent as Cause," *Free Will*, ed. Robert Kane (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2002) 203.

of certain features of themselves at the time?"[45] He insists that an adequate view must: 1. show how reasons move a person to act, not as external pressures but as one's own reasons; and 2. acknowledge that reasons do not usually have equal weight.[46]

In O'Connor's agent causation, an agent acts on himself by influencing his own psychological and physiological events. The agent's causation is exercised in effecting "an action-triggering state of intention" to act in accordance with reasons present within himself. The agent's reasons are potent and ready to cause action. But, they cannot do so without the agent's intention as a trigger. How does the agent's intention do this? O'Connor's account is cursory. Intending to act in accordance with present reasons is a basic form of activity, not reducible to any other process, and not further explicable. This would seem to imply that intending to act is itself sufficient to cause action. The agent's control over less immediate effects rests on this basis.

The weakness of O'Connor's view is that he posits what he calls a "distinctly personal form of causality" that is unlike any other form of causality and that he refuses to describe. He makes the negative statement that agent causation is not mechanistic, but at the same time he explains that an agent "triggers" action. A gun is a machine, and the trigger of a gun works by generating motion that sets off, by chain reaction, the forceful motion of the bullet. The pulling of the trigger and the ensuing chain reaction constitute of bundle of conditions which together are sufficient to cause action. O'Connor implies that agent causation is mechanistic by the metaphor he uses.

The *Gītā*'s agent causation satisfies O'Connor's demand that an adequate view show how reasons move a person to act and acknowledge that reasons do not usually have equal weight. It improves on O'Connor's view by offering an account of how the agent exercises its special form of causation.

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[45] O'Connor, "Agent as Cause" 200.

[46] O'Connor, "Agent as Cause" 203.

Libertarian interpretation of verses that suggest determinism

Let me return to those verses that *prima facie* seem to deny free will. I take *BG* 3.27 as representative of the group. It claims that the *guṇa*-s perform action. The verse, recall, reads:

> Actions are performed, in all cases,
> by the *guṇa*-s of *prakṛti*;
> One who is deceived by self-conceit
> thinks 'I am the doer'. (*BG* 3.27)

Let me begin by noting that action is, in Krishna's view, performed by the body, speech, mind (*manas*), or intelligence (*buddhi*) (*BG* 5.11, 18.15). In the body, the immediate causes of action are the *karmendriyāni* (literally, "action senses"), or powers of action of the hands, feet, mouth, genitals, and anus (*BG* 3.6), as set in motion by the *puruṣa*'s consent to act on a reason. The action senses, as I have argued, are empowered by God by means of the process of digestion. All this seems to indicate that the claim in *BG* 3.27 that the *guṇa*-s perform action is not meant literally.

I suggest that *BG* 3.27 is instructive. It tells the practitioner to abandon the thought "I am the doer" and instead attribute action to the *guṇa*-s. Instructions like this appear elsewhere (*BG* 5.8-9, 14.19, 18.26). They do not deny agency. They are, rather, part of a contemplative practice of disidentification supposed to free one from attachment to one's actions. Attachment to action leads to rebirth and suffering. The route to freedom is seeing that one is not a sole agent (*kevala kartṛ*). *BG* 18.16-17 expresses this:

> This being so, he who sees himself
> as a sole agent,
> Because wisdom is not yet ripe,

does not really see. He is a fool. (*BG* 18.16)

He who has no self-conceit,
whose intelligence is not polluted,
Even killing these people,
he does not kill, and is not bound. (*BG* 18.17)

The message is not that one is not free but that one's agency is not in itself sufficient for action. While one is free to act, one acts in dependence on a number of factors. *BG* 18.14-15 lists the five factors necessary for action. One is the agent. The other four, including God, are also necessary.

Matthew McKenzie cites *BG* 18.14-16 and argues that "we come to believe that we are the sovereign lords of our own actions and lives.[47] He also takes *BG* 18.14 to show that the agent is necessary for action, but not in itself sufficient.

BG 3.27, recall, states "One who is deceived by self-conceit
thinks 'I am the doer'." Self-importance is an impediment to yoga. The practitioner should eventually come to see all beings as equal to himself and adopt as his overarching goal the one goal that benefits all equally, that of world maintenance. The recognition that he is not the sole agent of his actions lessens his self-conceit.

[47] Matthew McKenzie, "The Five Factors of Action and the Decentering of Agency in the *Bhagavad Gītā*," *Asian Philosophy* 2.3 (2001): 144.

Chapter 3

Karma yoga involves performing obligatory action without desire. The concept of *niṣkāma karman* (action without desire) has been seen by several modern scholars of Indian philosophy as a *prima facie* problem. Roy Perrett, Simon Brodbeck, and Tara Chatterjea all argue that action requires desire, therefore desireless action is impossible, and so Krishna's *karma yoga* teaching cannot be taken literally. But I will argue that desire is not considered necessary for action in the *Gītā*, and therefore there is no problem taking *niṣkāma karman* to mean desireless action.

Subset interpretations

Perrett begins his problematization of the concept of *niṣkāma karman* by claiming that it is "a commonplace of classical Indian action theory that desire is a necessary causal condition of an action," naming the Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā as schools that hold such a view.[1] He asserts that the *Gītā* must share the view that action without desire is impossible and so finds the *niṣkāma karman* concept *prima facie* contradictory. Krishna cannot, he thinks, instruct practitioners to both perform obligatory action and completely abandon desire at the same time. Rather, he must mean for them to be free of a particular kind of desire.

[1] Roy W. Perrett, *Hindu Ethics: A Philosophical Study* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998) 23.

Christopher Framarin calls this a "subset interpretation" of *niṣkāma karman*.[2] Such an interpretation asserts that not all desires are to be abandoned but only a certain subset of them.

To flesh out his interpretation, Perrett appeals to Harry Frankfurt's notion of ordered desires. A first-order desire, according to Frankfurt, has an action as its object, for example, to fight the battle. He defines second-order desires as desires that have first-order desires as their objects, such as a desire not to want to fight the battle because people will die. First-order desires, Perrett holds, are necessary for action but not second-order ones.

Perrett goes on to define an "attached desire" as a first-order desire for an action along with a second-order desire for the first-order desire. An example is the desire to fight the battle along with a desire to want to fight the battle because winning could yield fame. Since Perrett thinks first-order desires are necessary for action, and Krishna instructs Arjuna not to abandon action, Perrett concludes that first-order desires must be allowed and second-order desires abandoned. In his view, the desire to fight the battle is permissible.

What Perrett thinks is not allowed is desire or aversion for first-order desires. Rather, he holds, the practitioner should allow the content of his first-order desires to be supplied by "the social norms that determine *svadharma*" or one's own duty.[3] Perrett gets one thing right: the practitioner must allow duty to determine his ends, not desire. But Perrett's view fails because he does not show how this might be done without second-order desires. His view does not allow that the practitioner adopt the

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[2] Christopher G. Framarin, "The Desires You Are Required to Get Rid of: A Functionalist Analysis of Desire in the *Bhagavadgītā*," *Philosophy East & West* 56 (2006): 605.

[3] Perrett, *Hindu Ethics* 25.

second-order desire to have only svadharmic first-order desires or the second-order desire to reject first-order desires that conflict with duty. Having appropriate first-order desires can be nothing more than accidental, under Perrett's view. Perrett cannot account for yogic self-discipline.

Frankfurt defines freedom of will as consisting in conformity of one's first- and second-order desires and the strength of will to act on them.[4] To abandon what Perrett calls attached desires is to abandon free will as Frankfurt defines the latter.

Frankfurt calls those who lack second-order volitions (second-order desires that first-order desires be effective) wantons.[5] They act without restraint on whatever first-order desires they have. First-order desires are restrained through second-order volitions. Perrett cannot differentiate between the practitioner and the wanton.

A better subset interpretation would take as allowable second-order desires for first-order desires that accord with one's duty, and first order desires that accord with one's duty. This interpretation better accounts for *karma yoga* as a discipline. I do not endorse this view, however.

Chatterjea, like Perrett, argues that classical Indian schools of thought all regard desire as a necessary condition of action.[6] If this is true of the classical systems, then it must be true of the *Gītā*, she implies.

She too argues that *niṣkāma karman* can only require that some desires be abandoned. She proposes that these are selfish desires, while the desire to do good for

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[4] Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *Journal of Philosophy* 67 (1971): 136.

[5] Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will" 132.

[6] Tara Chatterjea, *Knowledge and Freedom in Indian Philosophy* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003) 127.

the sake of others is not prohibited.[7] She gives a Humean account of motivation in which a pre-existing desire, paired with a relevant belief, causes action. She explains that for the *niṣkāma karman* practitioner the non-selfish desire to do good coupled with a true normative belief, such as Arjuna's "I should fight this battle," gives rise to a desire which motivates right action, such as Arjuna's fighting the battle.

In teaching *niṣkāma karman*, she argues, Krishna teaches the "allied concept" of equanimity.[8] By 'allied' she seems to mean 'equivalent'. She argues that non-selfish desires are those which are compatible with equanimity, while desires not allowed under *niṣkāma karman* are incompatible with equanimity. Thus, the requirement of desirelessness is equivalent to the equanimity requirement.

In response to Chatterjea, Framarin argues that even non-selfish desires violate the equanimity requirement. He offers the following example. "My desire to see my nieces flourish disposes me toward joy and disappointment in the same way that my desire that I flourish does."[9] This is a poor example since it is not clear that the desire to see his nieces flourish is a non-selfish desire. Rather, his desire to see his neices flourish might be based on an emotional attachment to his nieces by virtue of which their happiness causes him happiness and their suffering causes him to suffer. Assuming flourishing is a condition of happiness, his desire that his nieces flourish may be selfish, for when they experience happiness so does he. His desire to see his nieces flourish may dispose him to joy and disappointment just as his desire to flourish does because both are selfish desires. Framarin fails to show Chatterjea's solution inadequate.

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[7] Chatterjea, *Knowledge and Freedom* 140.

[8] Chatterjea, *Knowledge and Freedom* 132.

[9] Framarin, "Desires You Are Required to Get Rid of" 613.

But Chatterjea's proposal that the *niṣkāma karman* practitioner should be motivated by a non-selfish desire to do good is inadequate. For even if this desire does not dispose one to joy, it might dispose one to disappointment, and the latter is all we need to show to show that Chatterjea's solution violates the equanimity requirement. A person with a non-selfish desire to do good wishes to do good not because he expects it will bring him happiness but because he recognizes doing good as a worthwhile end in itself. Suppose this person is involved in an auto accident, fully paralyzed, and rendered mute. No longer able to act, he might reasonably feel disappointment at his condition. He knows there is now one less person in the world engaged in doing good. Something of inherent value, his doing good, has been lost. This is a basis for disappointment. Chatterjea's solution fails.

While Perrett and Chatterjea start with claims about classical Indian philosophy of action, Brodbeck turns to ancient texts. He claims that ancient Indian views of action are uniform in holding desire necessary for action. He quotes passages from the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* (*BU*), the *Mahābhārata*, and the *Manusmṛti* that recognize a connection between desire and action. For example, *Manusmṛti* 2.2-4 states: "Never is any activity of a desireless one seen in this world."[10] He goes on to say that because ancient texts share the view that desire is necessary for action so must the *Gītā*, and *niṣkāma karman* is therefore an incoherent notion.

Brodbeck's argument is weak. If the *Gītā* is an ancient text then Brodbeck is simply begging the question. If the *Gītā* is not an ancient text, then his generalization about ancient texts has no bearing on what views we can reasonably expect to find affirmed in the *Gītā*.

Taking *niṣkāma karman* to be an incoherent notion, Brodbeck is led to deny

[10] Simon Brodbeck, "Calling Kṛṣṇa's Bluff: Non-Attached Action in the Bhagavadgītā," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32 (2004): 85.

agency altogether. I examined his arguments in the previous chapter. Though Krishna instructs the practitioner to act for the sake of maintaining the world (*lokasaṃgraha*), Brodbeck claims that "it is clear that we cannot make philosophical progress without ignoring some of what Krishna says."[11] We are not forced to this in my reading.

Brodbeck follows George Teschner in reading the *Gītā* through Sāṃkhya. Perrett and Chatterjea, in contrast, seem to accept the Nyāya theory of motivation as standard. In that view, knowledge (*jñāna*) that performing an action will increase the agent's pleasure or decrease his pain (without causing greater harm) brings about desire (*cikirṣa*). Desire brings about the will to do (*pravṛtti*), which produces motor effort (*ceṣtā*) in the form of action (*kārya*).[12]

This formulation does not appear in the *Gītā*, but as I will show, some passages describe perception as giving rise to desire, and desire as causing action. The *Gītā* agrees that desire can contribute to action, but it does not hold that desire is necessary for action. Note that the Nyāya view holds desire necessary for action but not sufficient for action. The *Gītā* describes several kinds of action: sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic action, action of one who has transcended the *guṇa*-s, and God's action. They are each different in how they are motivated.

Purushottama Bilimoria's view

Purushottama Bilimoria makes no broad claim about the Indian tradition but simply asserts that Krishna accepts two presuppositions which inform his teaching.

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[11] Brodbeck, "Calling Kṛṣṇa's Bluff" 89.

[12] J. N. Mohanty, *Classical Indian Philosophy* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000) 105.

The first is that desire determines intention and action. Bilimoria attributes this to the *BU* 4.4.5.[13] The second is that action is necessarily conditioned by an antecedent desire. He does not cite a basis for this. Together the two express a biconditional relationship between desire and action: there is action if and only if there is desire.

Bilimoria offers a non-literal interpretation of *niṣkāma karman*, but his differs from the others. It is not a subset interpretation. He writes, "the *Gītā* does not aspire to total eradication of desire."[14] He thinks it may be impossible to be completely free of desire. And, suppression of desire is contrary to self-love. It can lead to pathology and deterioration of well-being.[15] Instead, he argues, the *Gītā* teaches equanimity toward desire as also toward the pairs of opposites such as pleasure and pain. Bilimoria understands equanimity not as indifference but as avoidance of extreme reactions. With regard to the pairs of opposites, to have equanimity means not being "too excited when experiencing joy," for example, "nor feeling too ruffled when feeling sorrow."[16] Extreme reactions are a problem, he seems to hold, because they can blind one to what is right and wrong in a situation. One should regard one's

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[13] As Bilimoria translates it, the passage reads:

> A person is what he desires;
> desires affect his resolve (*kratu*);
> this determines action . . .
> good action makes one good,
> bad action, evil.

[14] Purushottama Bilimoria, "Ethics of Emotion: Some Indian Reflections," *Emotions in Asian Thought: A Dialogue in Comparative Philosophy,* ed. Joel Marks and Roger T. Ames (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995) 79.

[15] Bilimoria, "Ethics of Emotion" 78-79.

[16] Bilimoria, "Ethics of Emotion" 78.

desires with a degree of aloofness.[17] This allows "balanced harmonious [moral] judgment."[18] One still acts on desires but only the morally appropriate ones. Equanimity enables one to do one's duty not by sheer force of will or suppression of one's nature but gracefully, in a way that balances "self-love" and "the wider horizon of cultural sensitivities."[19]

Bilimoria's interpretation portrays *karma yoga* as a discipline practicable for flesh-and-blood people, an effective means to liberation that does not require excising affect and longing, qualities at the heart of what it is to be human. But Krishna makes stricter demands of the practitioner. In the early phase of yoga practice Krishna recognizes that the practitioner will still experiences desires. Krishna instructs him to endure the agitation they cause (*BG* 5.27). But Krishna teaches that with practice desires "turn away" (*BG* 15.5), and complete desirelessness, mentioned many times in the text (*BG* 2.56-57, 2.64, 6.10, 12.17), is achieved. Desirelessness does seem to be a goal of *karma yoga*, draconian as this might seem.

At the end of his paper Bilimoria argues that desire can be transformed. "The energy (*śakti*) of desire can be redirected to another object of concentration and thereby transformed into another passion, viz. love."[20] He has in mind, specifically, the love of God. The means to this transformation is to see God in all objects of desire, remembering that God is all. Equanimity contributes to this redirection of energy, giving the practitioner enough "distance" from objects of desire that he is free to choose his object of concentration. The lover of God makes God's aim, the

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[17] Bilimoria, "Ethics of Emotion" 78.

[18] Bilimoria, "Ethics of Emotion" 79.

[19] Bilimoria, "Ethics of Emotion" 79.

[20] Bilimoria, "Ethics of Emotion" 79.

universal good, his own and thinks of himself as working in collaboration with God for this sake. The motive for this work is love.

Bilimoria seems to renounce the view that desire is required for action when he allows that love can motivate all of a person's actions. When directed to the right object, energy that was tied up in desire becomes love, according to him. And this energy, in the form of love, can motivate action. He seems to hold that energy, not desire, is necessary for action. This view is compatible with a literal reading of *niṣkāma karman*, and I endorse it.

Influence of Humeanism

Perrett, Chatterjea, and Brodbeck contend that the Indian philosophical tradition is homogeneous in its view of action. A careful and lengthy survey of texts would be required to support such a claim, but they do not offer one. Furthermore, according to J. N. Mohanty, classical Indian theories do not exhibit a uniformity of views about action. While the Nyāya and Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsā schools hold that desire is necessary for action, Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā does not.[21] According to the latter, all that is necessary for action is the belief that it should be done. This school holds that imperative statements of the form "*x* should be done" have the power to form the necessary belief.

Furthermore, Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Abhinavagupta, and Aurobindo, who are certainly well-acquainted with the Indian tradition, do not read the *Gītā* as holding that desire is necessary for action.

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[21] Mohanty, *Classical Indian Philosophy* 105-06.

This tenet, however, is fundamental to the Humean theory of motivation which has been called "a dogma in [Western] philosophical psychology."[22]

Hume sees the human being as a "mighty complicated machine" which obeys deterministic laws like everything else. He explains that sensory impressions produce internal feelings of pleasure or pain, and passions, such as desire, aversion, grief, joy, and hope arise immediately from internally felt pleasure and pain.[23] Passions determine the will,[24] he holds, and the will determines action in a mechanistic fashion.[25] He insists that people can be free, defining liberty as the power to do what one wants. This power belongs to everyone "who is not a prisoner in chains."[26]

Hume offers an empirical argument for his theory of motivation. From our experience, he claims, "our actions have a constant union with our motives [and] tempers."[27] Observation of the constant conjunction of passions with action is the basis for acknowledging the necessity of passion for action.

According to Michael Smith, Hume is the source of "the standard picture of human psychology,"[28] a neo-Humean theory which enjoys "a fair degree of uncritical

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[22] Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995) 93.

[23] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) 399.

[24] Hume, *Treatise* 417.

[25] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. S. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) 95.

[26] Hume, *Enquiry* 95.

[27] Hume, *Treatise* 400.

[28] Smith, *Moral Problem* 7-9.

acceptance" today.[29] According to this theory, the source of motivation for an action is a relevant desire to ϕ and a means-end belief that by ψ-ing one will ϕ.[30] A desire and a belief, together in the right kind of relationship, are necessary for action.

Whatever the source, Perrett and the others are unduly influenced in their readings of the *Gītā*. They make claims about the *Gītā* without paying sufficient attention to the text itself.

Contradictory statements about action

To be fair, there is much in the *Gītā* to discourage the philosopher. The text is peppered with verses that make apparently contradictory statements. In *BG* 4.13 Krishna claims he is both a doer and a non-doer.

> The four classes were created by me
> according to their shares of *guṇa*-s and actions.
> Though I am the doer of that,
> know me as the imperishable non-doer. (*BG* 4.13)

BG 18.17 seems to say that certain people can kill and not kill at the same time.

> He who has no self-conceit
> and whose intelligence is unstained,
> even killing these people, he does not kill
> and is not bound. (*BG* 18.17)

BG 4.18 seems to say that action is not what it seems.

> Who sees action in inaction

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[29] Smith, *Moral Problem* 93.

[30] Smith, *Moral Problem* 12.

and inaction in action,

he is wise among men.

He is disciplined in performing all actions. (*BG* 4.18)

Although it appears to have philosophical content, Franklin Edgerton argues that because of the prevalence of contradictory passages, we must take the *Gītā* as a mystical poem whose "appeal is to the emotions rather than to the intellect."[31]

The *Gītā* is surely a mystical poem *par excellence*. Still, it has a coherent view of action that is developed with some care, though it may not be as clear and complete as the modern philosopher would like.

The Gītā*'s theory of action*

Western action theorists often launch discussions of the nature of action by making an initial distinction between what is action and what is not. Dretske contrasts "things we do" with "things that happen to us."[32] The difference is causal. The former have their causes in us, while the latter are caused by things outside us. For Dretske, shivering and voluntarily moving one's arm are both things one does. The are both internally caused. He further contrasts voluntary behavior, which has intent and results from conscious choices, and involuntary behavior, which is done without a conscious reason.[33] Reaching to turn the stove down when one has decided a skillet is

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[31] Franklin Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gita Translated and Interpreted* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1952) 7.

[32] Fred Dretske, *Explaining Behavior: Reasons in a World of Causes* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988) 1.

[33] Dretske, *Explaining Behavior* 3-4.

too hot is voluntary behavior. Pulling one's hand from a hot stove is involuntary behavior. It is done before one is conscious of a reason to do so. Dretske considers what he calls internally produced changes such as shivering, sweating, growing hair, and the like and counts these as involuntary behavior. They do not require a reason.[34]

Action, according to Dretske, is "either itself something one does voluntarily or deliberately (e.g., playing the piano) or a direct consequence . . . of such a voluntary act (e.g., unintentionally disturbing one's neighbors by intentionally playing the piano)."[35]

Action is first at issue in the *Gītā* in Chapter 1. A distinction similar to Dretske's between voluntary and involuntary behavior is implicit. Arjuna is upset by the sight of his relatives arrayed on the opposite side of the battlefield and exclaims:

> My limbs sink
> and my mouth dries up.
> My body trembles
> and my hair bristles. (*BG* 1.29)
> The Gāṇḍiva bow slips from my hand
> and my skin burns.
> I cannot stand
> and my mind seems to reel. (*BG* 1.30)

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[34] Note that having certain conscious reasons, ones that are emotionally disturbing, say, can make one shiver or sweat.

[35] Dretske, *Explaining Behavior* 5. This is a preliminary account. Ultimately he articulates a nuanced causal view in which "behavior . . . is to be identified with a complex causal process, a structure wherein certain internal conditions or events produce certain external movements or changes" (p. 21). He holds that action results from two kinds of causes: triggers and structural causes, or dispositions to behave certain ways in response to certain triggers.

The point seems to be that he has lost his capacity for voluntary behavior. He cannot control his limbs or his weapon. At the same time, he is overcome by a set of involuntary reactions: a dry mouth, trembling, and goose bumps.

After giving a description of his physical state, Arjuna describes his mental state. He says that he sees no good in killing his relatives, nor does he desire any of the pleasurable things, such as victory or rule of the empire, that he could gain by fighting. He sees no reason to fight. Thus the text seems to recognize that voluntary behavior is done for a reason.

Action continues to be a prominent theme throughout the text, but it is not until Chapter 18 that a theoretical account is offered. This account, offered by Krishna to support Arjuna in making good choices, covers only voluntary action. There is a theory of the *saṃgraha*, or elements, of action (*BG* 18.18), a theory of the *kāraṇa*, or causal factors, of action (*BG* 18.13-14), and a theory of *codanā*, or incitement, of action (*BG* 18.18).

BG 18.15 states that action may be performed by the body, speech, or mind. According to *BG* 18.18, every action has three *saṃgraha* (elements): a *karaṇa*, or instrument; a *karman*, or act; and a *kartṛ*, or agent. Since not all action requires an instrument such as a sword, 'instrument' here must refer to the body, speech, or mind. Note that *karman* (act) is used here to explain something about *karman* (action). *Karman* (act) as an element of action may refer to movement, sound, or thought, as distinct from the instrument (body, speech, or mind) which performs these. *BG* 18.18 names the agent as a factor distinct from the instrument of action. This indicates voluntarism. Under a determinist reading the instrument and act are enough to constitute action, and there is no role for an agent. Inclusion of the agent as one of the factors of action indicates libertarianism.

A theory of the causal factors (*kāraṇa*) of action appears at *BG* 18.13-15.

> Learn from me, O Arjuna,

these five causes,
declared in the Sāṃkhya doctrine,
of the accomplishment of all actions. (*BG* 18.13)
The seat (*adhiṣṭhāna*), the agent (*kartṛ*),
and also the various instruments (*karaṇa-pṛthag-vidha*),
and the various motions (*vividhāḥ pṛthakceṣṭāḥ*),
and, too, divinity (*daiva*) as the fifth. (*BG* 18.14)
Whatever action may be undertaken
with the body, speech, or mind,
be it right or wrong,
these five are the causes. (*BG* 18.15)

As this is the key passage on action on the text, it will do to review with some care the scholarly and commentarial treatment it has received.

The handling of this passage by the Western *Gītā* scholars has for the most part been limited to simple translation. Translations by Edgerton, R. C. Zaehner, Robert Minor, and Winthrop Sargeant agree with the above translation except on the treatment of *daiva* (divinity). And in that they betray determinist leanings. Edgerton and Zaehner translate it 'fate'. Minor does too and argues that this is the common meaning of the word in the *Mahābhārata*.[36] Sargeant translates it 'divine providence'.[37] Both of these imply determinism, which is unacceptable.

Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja give the passage more attention.

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[36] Robert N. Minor, *The Bhagavad-Gītā: An Exegetical Commentary* (New Delhi: Heritage, 1982) 469.

[37] Winthrop Sargeant, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, ed. Christopher Chapple Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984) 675.

Śaṅkara takes the seat to be the body. The *kartṛ*, which I translate 'agent', is not an agent but a passive witness, in his view. It is Brahman as Ātman partaking of apparent individuality. The various instruments are the organs of sense and the various motions are the functions of the vital winds (*vayu*) such as breathing. He takes divinity to refer to gods such as *Āditya* with whose help the organs of sense, like the eye, function.[38] These five together are sufficient for action.[39] Śaṅkara considers action to be illusory in accordance with his metaphysics. The witness (*kartṛ*) is required, for what is merely apparent must have an observer.

Rāmānuja also takes the seat to be the body. He explains that the agent is the individual self (*ātman*), but as I discussed in Chapter 2 Rāmānuja ultimately concludes that the self only has agency vicariously through the *guṇa*-s. He takes the various instruments to be the five motor organs (speech, hands, feet, reproductive organs, and organs of evacuation) and the mind, and the various motions to be the five *prāṇa*-s, or vital winds, that sustain the body and senses.

Rāmānuja interprets divinity as God. He claims in this portion of his commentary that God is the "main cause in completing the action."[40] The individual self is dependent on God, "having him for [his] support, empowered by him, and thus deriving power from him."[41] God also enables the agent by creating him and maintaining fundamental conditions necessary for action including physical existence, the passage of time, and the agent's ability to choose. While the individual self carries

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[38] Śrī Śaṅkarācarya, *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Alladi Mahadeva Sastri (Madras: Samata Books, 1995) 454.

[39] Śaṅkarācarya, *Bhagavad Gita* 460.

[40] Śrī Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya*, trans. Swami Adidevananda (Mylapore: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2001) 559.

[41] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 559.

out action his actions are subject to God's consent.[42] This seems to mean that God's support might be withdrawn. The five factors together are required for action, but, Rāmānuja emphasizes, God has primacy among causes in that the other four depend on him in making their contribution to action.

This account of God's relationship to human action is compatible with a libertarian reading of the *Gītā*. But as I showed in the last chapter, Rāmānuja flounders on the issue of human freedom. He ultimately, and inconsistently, decides that the *guṇa*-s produce all action while the self merely witnesses. He explains that the *guṇa*-s are under God's control, and so God determines action through the *guṇa*-s.

I contend that the *kartṛ* (agent) mentioned in *BG* 18.13-15 is the individual self (*ātman* or *puruṣa*) and is meant to have agency in a full-fledged sense. In my view, there is a certain causal primacy the agent enjoys over the other four. As I argued in the previous chapter, God endows people's bodies with *ojas*, or energy (a push),[43] while the *guṇa*-s generate reasons (pulls). The agent determines when, how, and toward what end to direct his God-given bodily energy. The agent's role is primary in the sense of determining these features of a particular action.

Krishna addresses the causes of action from another angle in *BG* 18.18 where he describes the incitement (*codanā*) of action. Śaṅkara understands incitement as a

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[42] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 560.

[43] As I discussed in Chapter 3, Krishna states "I support all beings with energy (*ojas*)" (*BG* 15.13), and explains that he supports breathing beings (*prāṇin*) as the process of digestion (*BG* 15.14).

set of conditions necessary for action,[44] Rāmānuja as factors that induce action,[45] and Abhinavagupta as the inclination to act.[46]

Incitement is best understood as inclination. In terms of my push-pull model of motivation, it is the pull of a reason. Krishna says that it is threefold, produced by *jñāna*, or knowledge, *jñeya*, or the object of knowledge, and the *parijñātṛ*, or knower. These three are mutually dependent. Knowledge requires a knower and an object; a knower requires knowledge and an object; to be an object of knowledge requires a knower and knowledge.

According to the *Gītā*, reasons for action involve these three together. The text does not indicate how they must be involved. But as I will show, ordinary agents (everyone except highly advanced practitioners) necessarily recognize objects of knowledge as relevant or irrelevant to duty, pleasurable or painful, or objects of compulsion. Objects are ends for agents in virtue of the recognition of these qualities. The recognition of one of these qualities in an object by an agent is what constitutes a reason.

Jennifer Hornsby defines intention as a cognitive event of "trying or attempting to act."[47] For her, intention is a primitive state which causes muscle contraction and movement of the body.

Incitement is unlike intention in Hornsby's sense. Incitement is not irreducible and does not in itself cause action. The consent of the agent is also necessary.

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[44] Śaṅkarācarya, *Bhagavad Gita* 460.

[45] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 561.

[46] Abhinavagupta, *Abhinavagupta: Gītārthasaṅgraha*, trans. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1983) 270.

[47] Jennifer Hornsby, *Actions* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980) 33.

The knower that plays a role in incitement (*BG* 18.18) and the agent that is one of the five factors of action (*BG* 18.14) must be the same; they are the self (*ātman* or *puruṣa*). This identity is the tie between the theory of incitement and the theory of causes. The *puruṣa qua* knower is distinct from the *puruṣa qua* agent, though. The *puruṣa qua* knower does not cause action. But for the *puruṣa qua* agent to participate in causing action incitement is required. Therefore, the *puruṣa qua* agent must be a knower.

BG 18.19-28 further develop the account of incitement. It describes three kinds of knowledge: sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic. The text does not articulate three types of incitement, but from the three types of knowledge three types of incitement can be derived. The passage also describes three types of agents and actions according to the *guṇa*-s. Each type of agent is defined, in part, by a his or her reason for acting. Each type of action is defined, at least in part, by the reason for which it is characteristically performed.[48]

Knowledge, reasons for acting, and actions may be either sattvic, rajasic, or tamasic. I take an agent to be sattvic, rajasic, or tamasic when he or she is engaged in, respectively, a sattvic, rajasic, or tamasic action. For a person to be considered sattvic, rajasic, or tamasic in a general sense, the bulk of his psychological states and behavior must fall into one of the three sets. A sattvic person may at times engage in tamasic behavior.

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[48] This is an idealized picture which Krishna presents as a pragmatic tool. It draws strict distinctions between sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic action. Yet experience seems to show that in actual action what Krishna calls 'incitement' often involves a combination of the sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic. When it does, we seem warranted in categorizing an action according to the *guṇa* dominant in its incitement. Thus, we might call an action as 'sattvic' through it involves an element of desire, for example. However, this is not how sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic action are portrayed in the *Gītā* and I restrict my discussion to Krishna's idealized picture.

I now turn to the particular types of incitement, beginning with the rajasic because it is the most common. Rajasic knowledge is that which shows the knower distinct things, separate and various in their qualities (*BG* 18.21). Such knowledge is gained through the senses.

Earlier verses describe the senses as related to desire. *BG* 2.60 refers to the 'tormenting senses'. *BG* 3.34 explains that in every sense is situated attraction or aversion for its object and warns that one should not come under their sway. The *Gītā* sees the senses as doing dual duty: they generate knowledge of external events and bodies and they yield attraction or aversion to those phenomena.[49] Attraction and aversion pull on the knower. Rajasic knowledge has for its object sensible objects seen as attractive or the opposite. The knower of rajasic knowledge has desire or aversion for each object of knowledge. Rajasic incitement, then, is the pull of desire on the knower to possess or avoid an object of rajasic knowledge. If the *puruṣa* consents to it, rajasic action results. I say 'if' because a person may refuse rajasic incitement and choose sattvic, or tamasic, action.

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[49] Many modern Western psychologists agree that perception is evaluative with regard to attraction and aversion. Research by a team led by Kimberly J. Duckworth has been important in establishing this view. Duckworth *et al* have shown that novel stimuli such as nonsense words and abstract images elicit evaluative responses of like or dislike in subjects immediately, as they are perceived. In the paper presenting their work, Duckworth *et al* cite numerous studies conducted since the 1930's that establish the same evaluative responding for non-novel stimuli such as English words, sounds, and representational pictures. The team argues that in light of these previous results, their work on novel stimuli "strongly support[s] the position that evaluation is both unique and ubiquitous." Kimberly J. Duckworth, John A. Bargh, Magda Garcia, and Shelly Chaiken, "The Automatic Evaluation of Novel Stimuli," *Psychological Science* 13.6 (2002): 518. In a 1995 *New York Times* article on this area of research, psychologist Michael Posner states that the view is so well-accepted that most more recent models of how the mind processes information take this automatic evaluation into account. Daniel Goleman, "Brain May Tag All Perceptions with a Value," *New York Times* 8 Aug. 1995, C1.

The rajasic agent is one who chooses to act on rajasic incitement. *BG* 18.25 describes him as greedy and desirous of obtaining the fruits of action. According to *BG* 18.24, rajasic action is performed with the desire to obtain something. Desire is necessary to rajasic action.

Sattvic knowledge shows the knower one imperishable being in all the manifold things of the world, including himself (*BG* 18.20). The object of sattvic knowledge is unity in phenomenal diversity.

Desire is ruled out for the sattvic knower. Desire minimally requires the belief that there is something one lacks which can be an object of desire. Such a belief is incompatible with the sattvic perception of unity.

The sattvic knower is without desire, so sattvic incitement cannot involve desire. The sattvic agent is, accordingly, described as one who acts free from desire (*BG* 18.26). These are negative descriptions. Does the sattvic agent have a positive reason to act?

The sattvic knower has sattvic *buddhi*, or intelligence, and perceives what ought to be done and what ought not be done (*BG* 18.30). He directly perceives his duty and so knows what is obligatory for him at any given time. Knowledge of duty is his reason for action. Sattvic sacrifice, for example, is said to be done with the sole thought that it ought to be done (*BG* 17.11), and sattvic giving of gifts is done with the thought that the gift ought to be given (*BG* 17.20). Note that though the sattvic agent perceives the unity of all beings and things, this knowledge does not contribute significantly to his motivation. He does not act from compassion, for example, but simply from duty. Sattvic action is duty for duty's sake.

Sattvic incitement, then, is the pull of duty on one who perceives his own duty and is free from desire. If the self consents, sattvic action results. Obligatory action performed without desire for the results is categorized as sattvic (*BG* 18.23). Desire is not necessary to sattvic action.

Incitement that is classified as tamasic also does not involve desire. Tamasic knowledge fixates the mind on an object of little significance (*BG* 18.22). The tamasic knower is one who is without any real purpose, neither duty nor desire (*BG* 18.22). He is irrational. He performs action without regard to the consequences for himself or others (*BG* 18.25). Tamasic incitement is best understood as the pull of senseless obsession.

Such a person seems to be out of control of his behavior. The self beset by *tamas* still chooses what action to perform; he is still a consenter (*BG* 13.22). But *tamas* produces fixation, and so his psychology makes available only one choice. Because no one exists for a moment without acting (*BG* 3.5) he must make this choice. Hence *BG* 18.28 calls the tamasic agent stubborn.

Of the three kinds of action described in this passage only the rajasic requires desire. Neither the sattvic nor the tamasic do. Both these are examples of *niṣkāma karman* (desireless action). *Niṣkāma karman* also includes God's action and *karma yoga*. I discuss these last two in the next chapter.

Maintenance of the body

If activities like eating and sleeping are duties and desire is required in their performance, then some duties require desire and *niṣkāma karman* cannot be simply desireless action if that action is to be dutiful.

Krishna cites maintenance of body as a valid reason for the practitioner to act (*BG* 3.8). World maintenance must include it, for if others' lives ought to be maintained so should one's own. Later, the *Gītā* explicitly recognizes the need for food and sleep. The practitioner is instructed to eat and sleep in moderation (*BG* 6.16-17).

To eat in moderation would seem to require awareness of one's feelings of hunger. Moderation presumably means eating enough to satisfy one's hunger but not more. The same goes for sleep and the feeling of sleepiness. Eating appropriately also requires knowing when to eat. This would seem to require hunger. Again, the same seems true of sleep and sleepiness.

If hunger and sleepiness are desires, then the duty to maintain the body cannot be carried out without acting from certain desires.

The question of whether hunger and sleepiness are desires is not taken up in the text. But Krishna consistently depicts desire as psychological.[50] He says that desire is produced by the senses or by the mind contemplating sense objects (*BG* 2.62, 3.34) and that it abides in the senses, mind, and *buddhi* (*BG* 3.40). The body is not mentioned in these passages. It seems to have no involvement in producing or sustaining desires. *BG* 4.19-21 supports this suggestion by implying that the body is free from desires. It instructs the practitioner to exclude desire from his actions and instead, "perform actions with the body only."

Abhinavagupta argues that desire involves imagining (*vikalpa*), and that giving up imagining is the key to abandoning desire.[51] He means, perhaps, that one who desires an object imagines possessing or achieving it. Western theorists often characterize desires as states with which the world must fit, a view attributable to G. E. M. Anscombe.[52] A desire, they hold, has as its object a state of affairs that does not obtain. This would seem to involve imagination. A desire is satisfied when the world

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[50] Some yogic theory places desire in the vital energy sheath (*prāṇāmayakośa*) of the person. However, the *Gītā* does not mention the theory of sheaths (*kośa*) and takes desires as psychological, not energetic.

[51] Abhinavagupta, *Gītārthasaṅgraha* 148.

[52] G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) 56.

fits it, that is, if the state of affairs which is its object comes to pass. What Abhinavagupta and Anscombe hold of desire is not spelled out anywhere in the *Gītā*, yet it is consistent with the text and helps answer the question about hunger and sleepiness.

If desires are psychological, not bodily, then hunger and sleepiness are best understood as bodily feelings that motivate action in the sense of giving an agent reasons to act. These feelings, like desires, have a pull on the agent. But they are unlike desires in that they do not involve imagining.

They may motivate action without being represented in the mind as desire. One may be moved by hunger without imagining a scenario in which one's hunger is satisfied. This, I suggest, is what the practitioner is supposed to do. When hungry, he should not think about food that is not present but should be content with what chance may bring (*BG* 4.22, 12.19). He should see a cow, dog, and elephant as equal (*BG* 5.18) even though a cow gives milk. When a situation fails to satisfy a practitioner's hunger he should simply keep on. He should continue to pursue the task of feeding himself as he does any other duty: without expectation.

Yogic motivation

What motivates a practitioner to try to do *niṣkāma karman*?

In teaching Arjuna, Krishna assumes it is possible to refuse the promptings of desire, and to the this end teaches two kinds of restraint. One is withdrawal of the senses from their objects. Sensory contact with any object produces desire to possess or avoid it (*BG* 3.34). One means to disarming desire is to eliminate it by checking sensory activity. This is not compatible with action. When the senses are restrained in

this way they cannot generate knowledge of one's environment. This form of restraint is taught in sitting meditation instruction (*BG* 6.11-14).

Another form of restraint is also taught. In *BG* 5.21-24 Krishna describes one whose senses are restrained as able to bear the impulses generated by desire and wrath. This is called sensory restraint, but it does not involve the senses being withdrawn. They contact external objects and generate knowledge of those objects as well as attraction or aversion for them. The senses themselves are not actually subject to restraint but are allowed to function as normal. What is restrained is one's response to the desires the senses produce. One who has mastered such restraint is described in *BG* 2.70:

> Rivers enter the ocean
> which remains unmoved as it is being filled.
> He into whom desires enter thus
> attains peace, not one who has all kinds of desires. (*BG* 2.70)

Desires still exist and have force in this person. But discipline holds him steady as the ocean when he experiences desires.

Maintaining discipline takes a good deal of effort (*BG* 2.40). The senses, in producing desire, can sway a person (*BG* 3.34) and even carry him away (*BG* 2.60). One who controls the senses and resists desire is, correspondingly, described as firm or steady (*BG* 2.55-58). Standing firm is not easy. What reason can one have for taking up and maintaining such a difficult practice?

Arindam Chakrabarti considers the issue of yogic motivation. Krishna promises that liberation, supposed to be blissful, results from *niṣkāma karman* practice (*BG* 2.15, 3.19). This, Chakrabarti writes, seems to be offered as a reason to engage in the practice. But if one practices out of a desire to gain liberation, one is not

practicing *niṣkāma karman*, he argues.[53] He understands *karma yoga* as disallowing any kind of desire.

Chakrabarti acknowledges the Vedāntic view that desire for liberation (*mumukṣutva*) is essential to practice. He cites Sadānanda Vedāntasāra who explains that desire for objects other than the self is to be avoided. Since desire for liberation is directed toward the self, it is allowable for the practitioner, and in fact necessary.

Rāmānuja agrees. In his view, when the *Gītā* advocates "absence of desire" this means "dispassion toward all objects different from the spiritual self."[54] At the same time, in his view, desire for release is necessary for yoga practice.[55] He understands desire for release as equivalent to desire for the spiritual self. (Sadānanda Vedāntasāra and Rāmānuja offer subset interpretations of *karma yoga*.)

Chakrabarti maintains that *niśkāma karman* is to be understood as action without any desire whatsoever, so desire for liberation is not an allowable source of motivation for the practitioner. He goes on to argue that desire for liberation is insufficient as a source of motivation for yoga practice. He cites Vācaspatimiśra as warning: "nurtured by the assurance of a permanent happiness in liberation, the demoness of desire, given a little scope, will bind the aspirant even to nearer available worldly pleasures."[56] Desire for liberation is just desire for very great pleasure, he argues, and this will not do as yogic motivation. He worries that such desire is more easily satisfied by worldly pleasures, or at least the 'demoness of desire' makes it

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[53] Arindam Chakrabarti, "The End of Life: A Nyāya-Kantian Approach to the Bhagavadgītā," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 16 (1988): 329.

[54] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 435-36.

[55] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 90.

[56] Chakrabarti, "The End of Life" 330.

seem that way, and the practitioner with this motivation will be distracted by worldly pleasures and ultimately thwarted in his path.

Chakrabarti recognizes only one difference between the pleasure of liberation and worldly pleasures: the former is permanent while the latter is temporary. He assumes that pleasure is qualitatively homogenous, and so one pleasure can satisfy the desire for another.

This seems wrong. If there were a shortage of cocoa and vanilla were to become the more easily-accessible ice-cream flavor, the true chocolate ice cream aficionado would still long for his favorite. The pleasure of vanilla ice cream cannot satisfy the desire for the pleasure of chocolate ice cream. Likewise, worldly pleasures will not satisfy one who longs for the bliss of liberation.

In renouncing desire, the practitioner eschews pleasure and pain (*sukhaduḥkha*) and other pairs of opposites (*BG* 5.3). But he finds pleasure (*sukha*), joy (*ārāma*), and light (*jyoti*) within, in the self (*BG* 3.17-19, 5.21, 5.24). Pleasure (*sukha*) comes, according to Krishna, in two fundamental varieties. The first is that gratification generated by contact with desirable external objects. The second is the bliss inherent to the self.

Meanwhile, 'desire' seems to be used in a limited sense in the *Gītā*, such that worldly phenomena alone may be the objects of desire. Under this usage, pleasure which arises from contact with external objects may be an object of desire, while the bliss of the self cannot be.

> Indeed, when one is attached
> neither to the objects of the senses nor to actions,
> when one has given up all intentions,
> then he is said to have attained yoga. (*BG* 6.4)

Only actions and objects of the senses are candidates for being objects of desire. While the text often mentions desire for the fruits of action, it never mentions desire

for liberation, mental discipline, equanimity, or the bliss of self-knowledge. It seems that in Krishna's view, desire does not take such things as objects. Rather, he understands desire, like Anscombe, as a state that is satisfied or frustrated by events in the world. Since liberation is not a worldly event it cannot be the object of desire. For Krishna then, desire for liberation cannot give a practitioner a reason to practice.

Chakrabarti argues that the motive appropriate to the practitioner is *vairāgya*, or indifference. He describes indifference as the state of feeling "no more of all that" with regard to worldly pleasures and pains that comes from a recognition of their valuelessness.[57] Indifference "guarantees its own peaceful effect," liberation, yet is incompatible with desire for that effect.[58]

Vairāgya can also be translated as 'aversion' or 'disgust'. To make his solution work Chakrabarti must differentiate the practitioner from the depressive who, from aversion or disgust, feels that the pleasures and pains of the world are without value. He does not do this. A depressive who is completely indifferent may cease to act from desire and opt for suicide. His action counts as *niśkāma karman* but not yoga. For one thing, Krishna includes care of the body in what is enjoined of the practitioner. But in general, the practitioner acts for the sake of world maintenance. He recognizes value in the world itself, if not in worldly pleasures and pains. The depressive, on the other hand, is disgusted by the world.

Aurobindo better addresses the issue of yogic motivation. He acknowledges, first, that desire is the ordinary motive for human action. He warns against the view that the practitioner finds something outside himself, like the Vedic injunctions, or

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[57] Chakrabarti, "The End of Life" 333.

[58] Chakrabarti, "The End of Life" 333. Patañjali, in his *Yoga-Sūtra*, sees *vairāgya* as essential to yoga. *YS* 1.12 (*abhyāsa-vairāgyābhyām tan-nirodhaḥ*) asserts that the goal of yoga is to be achieved through practice and indifference (*vairāgya*).

dharma (duty), to give him a reason for action. Aurobindo writes: "We cannot become impersonal by obeying something outside ourselves, for we cannot so get outside ourselves; we can only do it by rising to the highest in ourselves, into our free Soul and Self which is the same and one in all and has therefore no personal interest."[59] Aurobindo calls this "acting Godwards."[60] In his view, the inner self gives one reason to practice yoga.

Aurobindo's understanding of nature is teleological and he interprets the *Gītā* in accordance with it. In his view, human existence is a process of evolution to higher and higher embodiments of consciousness. In *The Life Divine* he writes "To fulfill God in life is man's manhood. He starts from the animal vitality and its activities but a divine existence is his objective."[61] The motivation to practice yoga is inherent and is realized in the "psychic being" within each person. The psychic being "points always towards Truth and Right and Beauty . . . all that is a divine possibility in us."[62] It influences behavior to the end of developing the mind and body into instruments of expression of divine nature. In those who identify strongly with their lower selves, the influence of the psychic being goes unnoticed. For those with more self-knowledge, the psychic being produces a "certain sensitive feeling for all that is true and good and beautiful, fine and pure and noble, a response to it, [and] a demand for it."[63]

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[59] Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gītā* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1959) 150.

[60] Aurobindo, *Essays* 151.

[61] Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* (New York: The Greystone Press, 1949) 37.

[62] Aurobindo, *Life Divine* 208.

[63] Aurobindo, *Life Divine* 795.

In practicing *niṣkāma karman*, according to Aurobindo, the practitioner "puts away the lower self that desires and enjoys."[64] Through restraint of the lower self, one gradually develops knowledge of the inner self which is one with God.[65] The individual becomes aware of his divine nature.

The *Gītā* mentions no such thing as the psychic being. Aurobindo's view is still, strictly speaking, consistent with the *Gītā* except on one point. Krishna states that not everyone reaches liberation (*BG* 16.20), while Aurobindo argues to the contrary. But Krishna seems to agree with Aurobindo that those who practice yoga are born with the motivation to do so.

In Chapter 16 Krishna explains that there are two types of beings, the divine (*daiva*) and demoniac (*āsura*). It is unclear whether this division is natural or, like the theory of the *guṇa*-s, is a pragmatic division meant to be instructive. The divine type are endowed with qualities necessary for yoga practice (devotion to pursuit of self-knowledge or *jñānayoga vyavasthiti*, freedom from desire, compassion for all beings, and patience) and qualities conducive to doing one's duty (non-violence, veracity, and modesty; *BG* 16.1-3). They are assured of liberation (*BG* 16.5). Krishna tells Arjuna that, though he is currently beset with desire, he is of the divine type. The demoniac type, on the other hand, possess none of these qualities. They can expect to be reborn again and again (*BG* 16.20).

Krishna does not elaborate on the issue of yogic motivation. He does say that the divine type is devoted to the pursuit of self-knowledge (*jñānayoga vyavasthita*). But like Arjuna at the beginning of the *Gītā*, people of the divine type may not always be actively pursuing self-knowledge. This quality must be dispositional. But it is not

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[64] Aurobindo, *Essays* 160.

[65] Aurobindo, *Essays* 164.

clear what conditions are required for the disposition to practice yoga to produce the motivation to do so.

Elsewhere Krishna speaks of those who are *mokṣaparāyaṇa*, or intent on liberation (*BG* 5.28). Self-knowledge is their highest goal. They direct their intelligence (*buddhi*) and minds (*manas*) toward it and discipline their behavior for the sake of it (*BG* 5.17). Being intent on liberation may be an occurrent state produced by the divine type's inherent disposition to practice yoga.

If it is produced thus, and even if it is not, something must occasion the arising of the state of being intent on liberation. It is conditioned. Arjuna lacks this state at the beginning of the *Gītā*. It arises in him during the course of the dialogue.

I suggest that what makes Arjuna intent on liberation seems to be the taste of self-knowledge he gets from Krishna's teaching. Arjuna exemplifies the new practitioner. Krishna makes yoga practice possible for him, I propose, by giving him his first taste of self-knowledge, the teaching in Chapter 2 on the imperishable nature of the self (*BG* 2.53). This teaching is intended to bring Arjuna relief from his grief at the thought of his kinfolk's demise (*BG* 2.25-30). This relief comes from a glimpse of self-realization, perhaps, and constitutes a first taste of joy at the self within. This taste is enough to allow Arjuna to resist the desire to flee the battle and instead stay and do his duty to fight. This begins Arjuna's practice of *karma yoga*.

If being intent on liberation depends on the experience of joy it depends on the experience of something desirable and this makes it problematic. Chakrabarti's worry about the desire for liberation applies to being intent on liberation as well.

Chatterjea and Framarin point out that *karma yoga* is defined in terms of both desirelessness and equanimity, and suggest that when application of the desirelessness criterion is problematic one can appeal to the equanimity requirement. Their suggestion is helpful here. If being intent on liberation does not dispose one to joy or

disappointment at worldly events, we can accept it as an allowable reason for practicing *niśkāma karman*.

As I argued above, The *Gītā* uses 'desire' in a technical sense in which only worldly phenomena can be its objects. Therefore, all desires are "states with which the world must fit." Anything with this direction of fit will fail Framarin's test, for anything with this direction of fit is satisfied or frustrated by worldly events. Satisfaction brings joy, at least to a degree, and frustration always brings some upset. Anything with this direction of fit disposes one to joy or upset at worldly events.

Being intent on liberation does not have desire-like direction of fit. It is a state with which one's self-knowledge and self-identify must fit (*BG* 4.19-20, 4.34-35, 5.7). Such a state is not satisfied or frustrated by worldly events and does not dispose one to joy or disappointment at such events. It satisfies the equanimity requirement and is allowable in *karma yoga*.

One might point out that being intent on liberation is also a state with which one's affective and desiderative states must fit. It is satisfied when one is content with the self alone, free from desire, and experiences unconditioned bliss. So, it seems, it might dispose one to joy at inner events such as a period of successfully restraining of desire. It might dispose one to disappointment when one experiences an inner event such as a moment of anger. One might argue that Framarin's test is not broad enough because states that dispose one to joy or disappointment at either worldly or inner events violate the equanimity requirement.

Being intent on liberation would likely dispose the new practitioner to joy and upset at temporary yogic successes and failures. But this is not really a problem. Joy or disappointment as affective responses to inner events are themselves inner events. They are not the self. Being intent on liberation motivates one to turn away from inner events and look toward the self. Over time, with consistent practice, it leads one to permanently abandon such joy and disappointment. It disposes one to joy and

disappointment at inner events only in the short term. In the long term, it disposes one to freedom from these reactions. It engenders equanimity, and thus is compatible with *niṣkāma karman*.

Being intent on liberation can lead to self-knowledge. Thus it disposes one to experience the joy of self-knowledge. Such joy is a permanent quality of the self and is compatible with equanimity. Equanimity is not joylessness but contentment with one's current condition, whatever that may be. It is tranquility. Tranquility does not rule out joy.

Because being intent on liberation is compatible with *niṣkāma karman* and the only occurrent state mentioned by Krishna as serving as a source of yogic motivation, we should take it as the source of motivation for *niṣkāma karman*.

Chapter 4

I have discussed *niṣkāma karman* in general and have shown that several form of *niṣkāma karman* appear in the *Gītā*. *Karma yoga* is one of them. In this chapter I present a careful consideration *karma yoga* and the key notions that pertain to it.

Definition of karma yoga

Krishna promises that *karma yoga* practice will free one of karmic bondage (*BG* 2.39), free one from rebirth (*BG* 2.51), and lead to liberation (*BG* 2.51).

Krishna gives a compact discussion of *karma yoga* in *BG* 2.39-53. We glean a definition of the practice from the following verses.

> The Vedas belong to the realm of the three *guṇa*-s.
> Be free of the three *guṇa*-s, O Arjuna,
> free of the pairs of opposites, ever-abiding in truth,
> destitute of possessions, self-possessed. (*BG* 2.45)
> Your claim is to action alone,
> never, at any time, to its fruits.
> Do not let the fruits of action be your motive;
> do not be attached to inaction either. (*BG* 2.47)
> Established in yoga, perform actions,
> having abandoned attachment, O [Arjuna],
> being even-minded toward success and failure.

Yoga is equanimity, so it is said. (*BG* 2.48)

These verses establish *karma yoga* as performance of action free of the influence of the *guṇa*-s and without selfish interest in the outcome. This is not yet a complete definition.

Krishna adds to the positive description of *karma yoga* in Chapter 3.

Perform enjoined action!
Action is indeed better than inaction.
Moreover, the maintenance of your body
cannot be achieved through inaction. (*BG* 3.8)
Except for action for the sake of sacrifice,
this world is bound by action.
Perform action for that purpose. O Arjuna,
free from attachment. (*BG* 3.9)
As the ignorant work
attached in action, O [Arjuna],
let the wise work, unattached,
for the sake of world-maintenance. (*BG* 3.25)
Surrender all your action to me
by contemplating the supreme.
Free from desire and indifferent to possessions,
fight, your fever departed. (*BG* 3.30)

Now a complete definition is possible. *Karma yoga* is the practice of doing one's duty as a sacrifice for the sake of world maintenance, free of the influence of the *guṇa*-s, and without attachment. It involves surrendering all actions to God.

Of course, many elements of this definition are not yet clear. While I have explored disinterestedness in previous chapters, *karma yoga* goes beyond disinterestedness. In what follows I take up, in turn, the notions of performing duty as

a sacrifice for the sake of world maintenance, transcendence of the *guṇa*-s, nonattachment, and surrender of action to God. Through this discussion, a nuanced interpretation of *karma yoga* emerges.

First, however, I note briefly the role of meditation in *karma yoga*.

Note on the role of meditation in karma yoga

BG 2.39-53, which provides Krishna's initial definition of *karma yoga*, concludes with a mention of meditation.

> Your mind is confused by the Vedas and goes in
> different directions.
> When your mind is made immovable
> in deep, stable meditation,
> then will you achieve yoga. (*BG* 2.53)

Krishna gives detailed meditation in Chapter 6, where he describes a form of sitting meditation that is to be practiced in a secluded place with the eyes closed and the senses and mind restrained. Such deep meditation is not compatible with doing one's duty, in that they both cannot be performed at the same time. Meditation is prescribed for the *karma yoga* practitioner and he must find time for it as duty permits.

Though a worthy topic in itself, it is out of the scope of my project to discuss meditation further. My concern is with *karma yoga* generally, while meditation is a particular kind of action that Krishna recommends to Arjuna.

Duty as sacrifice for the sake of world maintenance

Recall that sattvic action is the performance of duty because it ought to be done without interest in the outcome. This is not the same as *karma yoga*. Sattvic action is duty for duty's sake. The agent's sole concern is for duty and he fails to see anything of value beyond this. He exercises virtue and further cultivates this quality in himself, but this cannot lead to the ultimate freedom sought after by the yoga practitioner. Rather, *sattva* binds the doer of sattvic action to virtue (*BG* 14.5), causing him to be reborn again as a virtuous person who continues to be concerned solely with virtue.

There is a sense in which sattvic action though not motivated by desire is yet self-regarding. The duty the agent is concerned to do is his *svadharma*, or his own duty. And, he does it because it is obligatory for him.

The practitioner of *karma yoga*, on the other hand, sees beyond his duty to the role the performance of his duty plays in the world. He does his duty not simply because it is enjoined of him but because it contributes to world maintenance. Further, he is not concerned with world maintenance merely because that is enjoined (*BG* 3.25). His concern is based on compassion for others and interest in participating in God's work (*BG* 3.21-24).

These latter concerns arise out of his devotion to God. The devotee comes to see God in all things and all beings, including himself (*BG* 6.30). As he identifies with all things through God, his sphere of concern expands. For one who so identifies, self-interest takes the form of universal compassion. The accomplished practitioner has compassion for all beings (*BG* 12.3, 16.2) and delight in the welfare of all beings (*BG* 5.25, 12.4). He acts for the one reason that all might share equally: world maintenance (*loksaṃgraha*). Obligatory action maintains the natural processes like rainfall and crop growth (*BG* 3.14) and thereby the lives of living beings. It also maintains the social order of the social system, which, if it fell apart, would lead to hell (*BG* 1.40-44).

God also acts for the sake of world maintenance (*BG* 3.22-24).

> These worlds would perish
> if I did not perform action.
> I would be a creator of confusion.
> and I would destroy these creatures. (*BG* 3.24)

Adopting God's ends as one's own is part of devotion. Krishna says, "Thinking solely of me . . . . they follow may path" (*BG* 4.10-11). It seems that the very notion of devotion includes patterning one's behavior, as much as possible, after God's. Furthermore, the devotee may reason that since God is the "enjoyer of all sacrifice" (*BG* 5.29), taking up God's ends makes one's actions a fitting sacrifice to God.

Transcendence of the **guṇa-*s***

The notion of transcendence of the *guṇa*-s is *prima facie* obscure. Initially, it is clear that it contributes to the goal of yoga. For the *guṇa*-s bind one to rebirth. To achieve immortality one must escape their effect.

> The embodied one who transcends
> the three *guṇa*-s arising from the body
> is released from birth, death, old age, and pain.
> He attains immortality. (*BG* 14.20)

States, faculties, and so on that belong to *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, in a distribution unique to one, make up one's personality. They cling to one's inner self upon death and one thereby retains the disposition for personality and embodiment and is reborn.

I will argue that transcendence of the *guṇa*-s is the abandonment of sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic action; it is rising above one's personality. The text makes it clear

that one who transcends the *guṇa*-s continues to act. I argue that the *guṇa*-s play no role in such action, which I call *nirguṇa karman,* or action without involvement of the *guṇa*-s. *Nirguṇa karman* is desireless and counts as a form of *niṣkāma karman*.

Actions require incitement, or ends and reasons. The ordinary person pursues ends that his sense of duty, desires, and delusions make seem worthwhile. But *nirguṇa karman*, I will argue, entails adopting God's ends and pursuing those ends out of devotion to God. Transcendence of the *guṇa*-s is directly related to the notion of performing duty as sacrifice for the sake of world maintenance.

I will further show that transcendence of the *guṇa*-s is related to the notion of surrendering one's actions to God.

Rāmānuja and others recognize transcendence of the *guṇa*-s and surrender of action to God as closely related concepts. This much of my view is not new, but my treatment of these two concepts is. Earlier views have been based, in one way or another, on determinism. I develop a view consistent with my libertarian reading of the *Gītā*.

Classical commentators on transcendence of the **guṇa-*s***

Śaṅkara holds that phenomena are illusory. At the same time they are produced by the *guṇa*-s according to strict causal laws. *Māyā*, or illusion, has a certain nature. It is constituted by the illusory *guṇa*-s which generate illusory agents, objects, and actions.

Transcendence of the *guṇa*-s, as he understands it, is a significant yogic achievement. He defines it as disidentification with the merely apparent reality the *guṇa*-s generate, where disidentification with *x* is the recognition that *x* is not one's

self. In his view, to transcend the *guṇa*-s is to realize that one's body, mind, and actions are not one's own.

For Śaṅkara the self in all beings is one and the same. It is called Brahman and in the *Gītā* is represented by Krishna. The goal of yoga is the realization of Brahman/the self. Transcendence of the *guṇa*-s contributes to this goal as the realization of the unreality of the non-self. Surprisingly, this realization has an effect on one's illusory person: one stops engaging in all action except that which is necessary for the "bare maintenance of the body."[1] One continues to care for one's body because yoga practice depends on it. Further contemplation may still be required to reach the final goal. Until this goal has been reached it is advantageous for one to retain one's current body as the process of death and rebirth would delay yogic success. When contemplation culminates in realization of the true nature of the self the practitioner abandons all action.

For Rāmānuja, a realist about the world, the *guṇa*-s determine all actions but not as constituents of material nature. In his view the *guṇa*-s are psychological factors produced by action which cause the performance of similar action in the future. For him, transcendence of the *guṇa*-s is disidentification with their activities. One who has achieved disidentification "understands that there is no connection between [the *guṇa*-s] and himself" and sees that the *guṇa*-s alone perform action.[2]

Rāmānuja too holds that disidentification changes a person. Upon realization of one's profound helplessness, he thinks, one no longer experiences desire for one's actions or their results. For Rāmānuja the *guṇa*-s generate desire, but disidentification

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[1] Śrī Śaṅkarācarya, *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Alladi Mahadeva Sastri (Madras: Samata Books, 1995) 393.

[2] Śrī Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya*, trans. Svāmī Adidevānanda (Mylapore: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1991) 479.

with the activity of the *guṇa*-s is more than disidentification with desire. It destroys desire and it does so generally. While it is difficult to cite examples of this advanced yogic achievement there are everyday examples of the destruction of particular desires through disidentification with their sources. For one, a student newly arrived in a foreign country for a semester of study abroad may experience the strong desire to abandon her studies there and return home. But suppose she meets other foreign students and hears that they each have, at one time or another, experienced similar desires. Then she may recognize her desire to go home as a symptom of homesickness. Doing so may transform her desire into mere nostalgia, the recollection of her home that, however wistful, does not motivate her to return. The *guṇa*-s, like homesickness, are just psychological factors. Rāmānuja holds that their effects can be observed and discounted by the practitioner.

Rāmānuja explains that "seeking surrender to the Lord . . . is the only means for transcending the *guṇa*-s."[3] In his view the *guṇa*-s are controlled by God. Surrender to God (*prapatti*) is acceptance of this fact and entails disidentification with the *guṇa*-s and, positively, identification with God.

Identification with the *guṇa*-s is "delusive identification."[4] "Such identification is overcome," Rāmānuja explains, "through contemplation of the real nature of the self."[5] The *Gītā* states that God is the self of all beings. Rāmānuja explains, according to his Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, that God is the inner self of all selves, while individual selves along with the material world constitute the body of God. Thus, surrender to God entails identifying with God as one's true self.

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[3] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 481.

[4] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 173.

[5] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 173.

BG 14.27 explains that God is the foundation (*pratiṣṭhā*) of the *śāśvata dharma*, or eternal moral law.

> For I am the foundation of *brahman*,
> of the immortal and imperishable,
> of the eternal moral law,
> and the highest bliss. (*BG* 14.27)

Rāmānuja argues that surrender to God, beyond entailing identifying with God, further entails surrender to duty. "Although the expression 'eternal dharma' is indicative of the conduct to be observed, in *BG* 14.27 it means the goal to be obtained,"[6] Rāmānuja explains. Duty itself cannot be the practitioner's goal for everyone has his own duty by virtue of birth and social station. To say duty is a goal must mean that the practitioner aims for the perfect performance of his duty. This goal can only be achieved through surrender to God.

Rāmānuja's view seems to be that through surrender to God the practitioner looses himself from the influence of the *guṇa*-s over his behavior and submits himself to the influence of God and obedience to God's order.

Abhinavagupta describes the *guṇa*-s as qualities that arise in an individual self due to ignorance.[7] The ignorant takes themselves to be individual, mortal, and of limited knowledge and power. In truth, according to Abhinavagupta, the individual self is essentially identical Śiva and possess Śiva's omniscience, omnipotence, and freedom in full. The ignorant take the objects of cognition and action to be distinct from each other and themselves when in truth the cosmos is one and is Śiva.

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[6] Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 481.

[7] Abhinavagupta, *Īśvara-Pratyabhijñā-Vimarśinī*, ed. R. C. Dwivedi, trans. K. C. Pandey, vol. 3 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986) 221.

Abhinavagupta refers to the *guṇa*-s as qualities.[8] He offers a brief account of their natures and functions, as follows.[9] *Sattva* is characterized by pleasure and it generates knowledge of distinct objects. *Rajas* is characterized by pain, and functions as action. *Tamas* is characterized by the absence of pleasure and pain; it produces limitation.

Abhinavagupta explains that limited subjects have "being and its negation"[10] due to their ignorance. Being refers to consciousness, which in Abhinavagupta's non-dual idealism is omniscient, creative, and eternal. It may be negated in a subject apparently but not essentially. Its negation is ignorance. Ignorance is an apparent, non-essential quality of the limited self. Abhinavagupta identifies this quality as the *guṇa tamas*. The presence of non-being (ignorance or *tamas*) limits the extent to which being (consciousness) can manifest in the domain of what is apparent to an individual self. Consciousness thus limited wrongly takes selves and objects to be distinct. Abhinavagupta identifies such knowledge as the *guṇa sattva*.

Similarly, the limited subject has "bliss and its negation."[11] The manifestation of Śiva's unconditioned bliss in an individual is limited by the presence of ignorance which views the objects of experience as distinct from himself and thus engenders the belief that experiences are conditioned by external objects. Bliss manifests on the level of appearances as limited, conditioned pleasure. This property belongs to the *guṇa sattva*.

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[8] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 223.

[9] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 221.

[10] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 223.

[11] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 223.

Pain, according to Abhinavagupta, belongs to *rajas* and arises when the conditions of pleasure are not met. *Rajas* is also the quality of action in limited subjects. The objects of such action are thought to be separate from the self. [12] Thus action is conditioned by *sattva* as limited knowledge and *tamas* as ignorance, the limiting condition. This may be why Abhinavagupta explains the *guṇa rajas* as a "mixture" of *sattva* and *tamas*.

According to Abhinavagupta, action by a limited subject is never free from the three *guṇa*-s.[13] But the yoga practitioner can transcend the *guṇa*-s by dispelling ignorance (*tamas*) and realizing his true nature as identical with Śiva. In so doing, he realizes his omniscience, omnipotence, freedom, bliss, and immortality. In his vision of oneness of all things, Abhinavagupta holds, he rises above conventional morality. the latter is based on the ignorant attachment to the opposites of good and evil, purity and impurity, life and death, and so on.[14] Hence, he will not necessarily do what duty requires of him. Instead, Abhinavagupta explains, his actions will be guided by compassion for the ignorant who he recognizes as "troubled . . . and deserving of help."[15] The advanced practitioner's "identity with the Supreme . . . precludes the possibility of any other motive in him than the good of others, because he has attained perfection."[16] He has cast off ignorance and with it the *guṇa*-s and conventional morality.

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[12] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 221.

[13] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 223.

[14] Paul Eduardo Muller-Ortega, *The Triadic Heart of Śiva: Kaula Tantricism of Abhinavagupta in the Non-Dual Shaivism of Kashmir* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1997) 33.

[15] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 5.

[16] Abhinavagupta, *IPV* vol. 3 5.

Aurobindo's position on this issue resembles that of Rāmānuja more so than that of Abhinavagupta, his fellow Tantric. Aurobindo holds that all actions are determined by Brahman's will. At earlier stages of evolution, this determination is mediated by the *guṇa*-s, material constituents that are created by Brahman and obey strict deterministic laws. Intelligence and apparent will in man are due to *sattva*. "In man *sattva* is awake and acts not only as intelligence and intelligent will, but as a seeking for light, for right knowledge and right action according to that knowledge."[17] Hence, the will is not free but is determined by what Brahman has established as right action. "When the ego thinks 'I choose and will this virtuous and not that evil action', it is simply associating itself, somewhat . . . as might a cog or other part of a mechanism if it were conscious, with a predominant wave . . . of the sattvic principle by which Natures chooses . . . one type of action in preference to another."[18] At later stages of evolution, a faculty called the psychic being empowers an agent to resist the *guṇa*-s and perform action that promotes truth, right, and beauty.[19] In this, as before, the agent participates in divine work, obeying the will of Brahman.[20]

To gain genuine freedom, Aurobindo explains, one must realize and identify with Brahman, "the one will that is really free."[21] "For that we must rise above the three *guṇa*-s . . . for that self is beyond even the sattvic principle."[22] The practitioner's

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[17] Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1959) 298.

[18] Aurobindo, *Essays* 299-300.

[19] Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* (New York: The Greystone Press, 1949) 208.

[20] Aurobindo, *Essays* 49.

[21] Aurobindo, *Essays* 301.

[22] Aurobindo, *Essays* 301.

goals is to recognize "all action as not his own but Nature's, as the play of her *guṇa*-s."[23] For Aurobindo, transcendence of the *guṇa*-s is disidentification with them and it leads to identifying instead with Brahman.[24] This shift does not bring about omnipotence as Abhinavagupta holds. Aurobindo explains that "nature is the doer and carries out her action after this machinery is dispensed with,"[25] or, that is, after one has disidentified with the *guṇa*-s. The practitioner is never free to act according to his own individual will.

Several claims Aurobindo makes seem to entail that one who has gone beyond the *guṇa*-s will do only what is sattvic. He sees *tamas* predominating, and determining behavior, at the lowest evolutionary stages. At higher stages *rajas* predominates, then later *sattva*. "We have to climb to [*guṇa*-transcendence] through the *sattva*."[26] Preponderance of *sattva* is a necessary precedent to the transcendence of the *guṇa*-s. Once that latter stage has been reached, it seems unlikely *sattva* will cease to dominate the composition of the practitioner's body and mind. Aurobindo depicts evolution as proceeding in a constantly upward fashion. It would be inconsistent with this to allow that progress in one's self-understanding could be attended by devolution in one's mental and physical make-up.

Robert Minor is one of the few modern Western scholars to address the idea of transcendence of the *guṇa*-s. He takes the *guṇa*-s to be the elements of material nature

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[23] Aurobindo, *Essays* 306.

[24] Aurobindo, *Essays* 302-14.

[25] Aurobindo, *Essays* 305.

[26] Aurobindo, *Essays* 301.

responsible for all qualities.[27] He writes: "The *guṇa*-s are the elements of things that cause them to be and act in a certain manner."[28] He explains that action is an attribute of objects and is produced by the *guṇa*-s. Like others, Minor sees transcendence of the *guṇa*-s as disidentification. But for him the realization that one is not really in control of one's deeds does not have the effect that Rāmānuja thinks it does. He holds that it destroys desire for pleasure but not the desire to do one's duty. Minor writes that in one who has transcended the *guṇa*-s "there is . . . no desire to achieve ends, but only to do one's duty."[29] Desire for duty remains and with this righteous motivation one does sattvic action. As Minor sees it, the practitioner cannot abandon desire altogether and still act.

The views of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Aurobindo, and Minor are all grounded in determinism. As I argued in Chapter 2, the *Gītā*, as a yogic text, implies voluntarism. Of the views entertained so far, only Abhinavagupta's interpretation of surrender to God and transcendence of the *guṇa*-s is adequate in this regard.

Furthermore, as a yogic text the *Gītā* is not only concerned to teach a way to immortality but also to promote appropriate action for the embodied. To the latter end, it teaches a way out of moral dilemmas. Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Aurobindo, and Minor fail to recognize the difficulty of this project. They seem to think that Arjuna can escape his by disidentifying with his body and mind thus freeing them to perform required duties. But his duties conflict, and a change in attitude does not change this.

Krishna resolves Arjuna's dilemma. This shows that recourse to Krishna is the right response to moral dilemma, and that relationship with Krishna is necessary for

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[27] Robert Minor, *Bhagavad-Gītā: An Exegetical Commentary* (New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1982) 70.

[28] Minor, *Bhagavad-Gītā* 110.

[29] Minor, *Bhagavad-Gītā* 413.

yoga. If the practitioner who has transcended the *guṇa*-s simply does what is sattvic, as Rāmānuja and others think, then devotion to Krishna need play no role in his action. And then relationship with Krishna is not a practical necessity of yoga practice. I disagree.

In what follows I develop my own view in contrast to Minor's disidentificationism. Minor's view is well-articulated and the weakest of the above forms of disidentificationism (in that he takes disidentification to have the weakest effect on the practitioner's psychological make-up), so I let him represent the camp.

Libertarian interpretation of transcendence of the **guṇa-*s***

I argued in Chapter 2 that the *guṇa*-s are sets of psychological features where psychology is broadly construed as including the mental, moral, affective, and behavioral. I argued in Chapter 3 that faculties and states that belong to the *guṇa*-s such as knowledge and desire produce incitement, a necessary condition of action that consists in a subject's recognition of an end and a reason to pursue that end. When more than one incitement are present an agent is free to choose from among them. When only one is present his choice is forced but still necessary for action. I bring this view of the *guṇa*-s and action to the following discussion.

I also employ, in what follows, a notion of the ideal *yogin*, or practitioner. He is one who obeys all Krishna's yoga instructions, maintains ongoing practice with flawless discipline, and by virtue of his efforts has achieved all yogic goals possible for one still embodied.

The text makes few explicit statements about the transcendence of the *guṇa*-s. First, the three *guṇa*-s are impediments to the ultimate goal of yoga. One must transcend them to attain immortality (*BG* 2.45, 14.20). Second, one transcends the

guṇa-s while still embodied. According to *BG* 14.20, it is the embodied self (*dehin*) which transcends the *guṇa*-s and attains immortality.

It seems clear that the embodied one who has transcended the *guṇa*-s still engages in action. The maintenance of the body requires action (*BG* 3.8) as does the maintenance of the world (*BG* 3.14, 22-24). Krishna promotes both of these. Furthermore, *BG* 14.26 states that the practitioner who transcends the *guṇa*-s serves (*sev*) God with *bhakti yoga* or devotion.

> And he who serves me
> with unfailing *bhakti yoga*,
> transcending the three *guṇa*-s,
> is ready for absorption in *brahman*. (*BG* 14.26)

The verb *sev* means 'to dwell in' and 'worship', but it also means 'to obey' which implies action.[30]

In *BG* 7.13 Krishna describes his relationship the *guṇa*-s.

> This whole world is confused
> by the three [types of] conditions the *guṇa*-s establish.
> Because of these they do not recognize me
> who am beyond these and imperishable. (*BG* 7.13)

This verse requires interpretation. 'Whole world' cannot be meant literally for ideal *yogin*-s live in the world and do recognize God (*BG* 14.19). *BG* 7.13 should be read in light of *BG* 7.3 in which Krishna states that "hardly anyone truly knows me" since ordinary people and most *yogin*-s do not recognize him. Recognizing God requires seeing through the confusion generated by the *guṇa*-s. The ideal *yogin* is not confused but the ordinary person is. Most practitioners find themselves somewhere between these two poles.

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[30] Arthur Anthony Macdonell, *A Practical Sanskrit Dictionary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004) 359.

Instead of 'confused', some translators have rendered *mohita* as 'deluded'.[31] But the states and faculties associated with the *guṇa*-s do not necessarily involve non-veridical perception or false beliefs. *Sattva*, for example, includes knowledge. *Moha* (confusion) can be understood merely as the effect the *guṇa*-s have of obscuring the true nature of the self, God, and reality. The states they include can so capture a person's attention that he spends his days fully absorbed in them. Most of us think only of what we know, what we imagine, what we ought to do, and what we want to do. We are caught up in the life of the mind and do not look beyond it.

When one is able to turn attention away from states like desire one may come to know the ultimate truth. "When he . . . knows that which is beyond the *guṇa*-s, he reaches my being" (*BG* 14.19). This knowledge is gained by sustained contemplation of God and his nature.

Knowing that which is beyond the *guṇa*-s brings about the transcendence of them. *BG* 14.19 states that when one knows that which is beyond the *guṇa*-s one "reaches Krishna," or liberation. Since God is beyond the *guṇa*-s, reaching this state would require transcending the *guṇa*-s.

BG 14.19 also states that the ideal *yogin* "perceives no doer (*kartṛ*) other than the *guṇa*-s." Minor takes this to mean that the ideal *yogin* knows that the *guṇa*-s cause all human action. He explains that the one who has transcended the *guṇa*-s sees this but knows better than to take the actions of the *guṇa*-s as his own.

However, *BG* 14.19 cannot mean that the ideal *yogin* recognizes no agent at all other than the *guṇa*-s. The ideal *yogin* knows that God is an agent. Even if, as Rāmānuja holds, God controls the *guṇa*-s and acts through them he is still the agent and the *guṇa*-s can be nothing more than his instruments. Minor's strict reading of

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[31] Minor say they cause "confusion and delusion." Minor, *Bhagavad-Gītā* 244; Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya* 251; Śaṅkarācarya, *Bhagavad Gita* 213; Winthrop Sargeant, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, ed. Christopher Chapple Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984) 331.

this verse is not acceptable. It entails either that God is inactive or that his actions are determined by the *guṇa*-s and he is therefore not free.

'Doer' in *BG* 14.19 must be taken in a limited sense. It cannot refer to God and I will show below that it does not refer to the ideal *yogin* either. It can refer only to ordinary people. *BG* 7.13, as I take it, states that ordinary people do not see anything not mediated by the *guṇa*-s. The reasons for which they act, then, are always either sattvic, rajasic, or tamasic and their agency is never exercised independently of the *guṇa*-s. In my view what the ideal *yogin* knows, according to *BG* 14.19, is that for ordinary people agency is not exercised apart from the *guṇa*-s.

The ideal *yogin*, on the other hand, is free from the influence of the *guṇa*-s. In *BG* 14.23 Krishna explains that the *yogin* "is not stirred (*vicālyate*) by the *guṇa*-s, thinking only 'the *guṇa*-s go on (*vartante*)'." Unlike ordinary people, the ideal *yogin* does not respond to his sense of duty, desires, and delusions. He watches as feelings of obligation to do certain things and desires for certain objects arise, but he does not act from them.

In Chapter 3, I described how restraint of desire is to be understood. It can be, alternately, to reign in desire so tightly as to immobilize it, or to stand firm and immobile oneself as desires well up and generate turbulence in the inner landscape. In practicing *nirguṇa karman*, the latter form of restraint is applied to desire and all other features that belong to the *guṇa*-s. While they might be reigned in, they cannot be completely immobilized. According to *BG* 14.23, psychological elements associated with the *guṇa*-s are present even in the ideal *yogin*. The verse also tells the practitioner what to do. He should be unmoved by the sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic.

BG 14.19-23 give the most substantive discussion of the transcendence of the *guṇa*-s to be found in the text. *BG* 14.19 indicates how it is achieved, while *BG* 14.23 describes negatively how one with this achievements acts. He does neither sattvic, rajasic, nor tamasic action.

Two senses of 'action' and 'agent'

My interpretation of *BG* 14.19-23 hinges on taking 'agent' in *BG* 14.19 to refer only to a limited group of agents: ordinary individuals. This is not *ad hoc*. There are a number of verses in the *Gītā* in which 'action' and 'agent' must be taken as employed in not one general but two limited senses: to refer to ordinary action and agency on the one hand and divine or ideal yogic action and agency on the other.

I showed that a move like this is necessary in reading *BG* 7.13, where 'this whole world' cannot refer to all people but just to ordinary people. Three more examples are *BG* 4.13-14, 4.20, and18.17. In *BG* 4.13-14, Krishna states that although he as God creates, Arjuna should know him as a non-agent.

> The four types were created by me
> according to their shares of *guṇa*-s and actions.
> Though I am the doer of that,
> know me as the imperishable non-doer. (*BG* 4.13)
> Actions do not stain me.
> Nor do I take pleasure in their results.
> Who recognizes me thus
> is not bound by his actions. (*BG* 4.14)

BG 4.20 explains that even when the ideal *yogin* acts he does nothing at all.

> Renouncing attachment to the results of his actions,
> ever-satisfied and free,
> though he be occupied with action
> he really does nothing at all. (*BG* 4.20)

BG 18.17 states that the *yogin* without self-conceit does not kill, even while killing.

He who has no self-conceit
and whose intelligence is unstained,
even killing these people, he does not kill
and is not bound. (*BG* 18.17)

The contradictions apparent in these passages suggest they must read in a nuanced manner. I will argue that they employ two senses of 'agent' and 'action'. In one sense, God or the ideal *yogin* can be identified as agents, but in another sense of the term they cannot be. Similarly, in one sense of the term, action may be attributed of God or the ideal *yogin*, but in another sense it may not be.

These passages have two more significant commonalities beyond the contradictions they contain. First, the subject of each passage is an agent who is described as lacking a feature characteristic of ordinary agents. In *BG* 4.13-14, Krishna explains that he as God is not bound by his actions. Normal agents are, and this bondage results in rebirth. The ideal *yogin* in *BG* 4.20 has no desire regarding the results of his actions, but ordinary agents act out of desire (*BG* 3.39). The agent in *BG* 18.17 has no self-conceit (*ahaṃkāra*), though elsewhere this is listed as an element of human nature (*BG* 13.5). The subject of each verse is established as non-ordinary.

Second, these three passages all use the subordinate conjunction *api*, which can be translated 'even' or 'though' and indicates a relationship of concession between the subordinate and main clauses. *BG* 4.13-14 concedes that God does act, though there is a sense in which he is a non-agent. In *BG* 4.20 and *BG* 18.17 it is conceded that the ideal *yogin* does act and does kill, though there is a sense in which he does not, namely, he does not generate karmic bondage.

When *BG* 4.13-14 calls God a non-agent, I suggest, it means he is not an agent in the ordinary sense. Ordinary agents generate karmic bondage. While he is a divine agent his is not an ordinary agent since, for one thing, he does not accrue karmic bondage. Similarly, when *BG* 4.20 and *BG* 18.17 say the ideal *yogin* does not act,

they mean that he does not engage in ordinary action because he is not bound by action. They affirm that he does ideal yogic action and not ordinary action.

The following argument can be made. Since bondage is generated by the *guṇa*-s and neither God nor the ideal *yogin* are bound by their actions, their actions must be *nirguṇa karman*, or free of the involvement of the *guṇa*-s.

In my view, these passages implicitly recognize two senses of 'agent' and 'action': the divine or ideal yogic and the ordinary. This suggestion is not novel in light of the fact that Krishna frequently contrasts the *yogin* and the non-*yogin* (*BG* 2.19-21, 2.42-45, 3.31-32, 4.40-41, 6.36).

Specifically, the passages show that divine or ideal yogic action is *nirguṇa karman*.

Nonattachment

BG 14.26 indicates that the practitioner who has transcended the *guṇa*-s acts, but according to *BG* 14.19-23 he does not act for the sake of duty, desire, or delusion. *BG* 3.22-29 calls such action nonattached and likens it to God's own action.

In *BG* 3.22, Krishna explains that nothing is obligatory for him, yet he as God still engages in action.

> For me, O Son of Pṛthā, there is nothing
> in the three worlds which ought to be done.
> There is nothing to be obtained that has not been obtained.
> Still, I engage in action. (*BG* 3.22)

He has no duty, nor does he have desire since there is nothing he does not already possess. He acts neither from duty nor desire but in order to keep the world from destruction. He instructs the practitioner: "Let the wise one work, nonattached, for the

sake of world maintenance (*lokasaṃgraha*)" (*BG* 3.25). A parallelism seems implied: the practitioner should act like God does. But while God has neither duty nor desire, all practitioners have duty and some still have desire. It is with regard to both duty and desire, I think, that the practitioner is told to be nonattached. Nonattachment is often interpreted to mean desirelessness, but if that is all Krishna means here then pointing out that he has no duty is superfluous. The practitioner should abandon desire and his interest in duty for duty's sake. He works for the sake of world maintenance, doing his duty because it contributes to world maintenance.

Verses *BG* 3.28-29 define nonattachment in terms of the *guṇa*-s.

> But he who knows
> the *guṇa*-s and action as two separate things (*guṇakarmavibhāga)*,
> thinking "the *guṇa*-s move among the *guṇa*-s,"
> is not attached. (*BG* 3.28)
> Those who are confused by the *guṇa*-s of their nature
> are attached to *guṇa*-related action (*guṇa karman*).
> The one who knows the whole truth should not disturb
> the weak-minded whose knowledge is incomplete. (*BG* 3.29)

Minor takes this passage to teach disidentification with *guṇa karman*, which he understands as the action of material *guṇa*-s. As he reads the passage, the practitioner should know *guṇakarmavibhāga* or 'separation from both the *guṇa*-s and [action]'.[32] In Minor's view, the *guṇa*-s and action are effectively inseparable. He takes *guṇakarmavibhāga* to refer to one distinction: that between the practitioner's inner self, on the one hand, and the his *guṇa*-made actions on the other.

However, the compound *guṇakarmavibhāga* is grammatically dual in *BG* 3.28. Two *vibhāga* or distinctions are meant. Winthrop Sargeant recognizes this and

[32] Minor, *Bhagavad-Gītā* 131.

renders *guṇakarmavibhāga* 'the two roles of *guṇa* and action'.[33] Minor, holding as he does the necessity of the *guṇa*-s for action, must ignore the number of the compound

I take *BG* 3.28, like *BG* 14.23, to describe the ideal *yogin*'s recognition that the states and so on that belong to the *guṇa*-s go through their own processes and need not involve him. They arise and cease for certain reasons, pull on him harder under certain conditions, lay dormant then later reappear, and so on. He knows from experience that the *guṇa*-s and action are two separate things (*guṇakarmavibhāga*). He knows what it is to act free of the influence of his sense of duty, desires, and delusions. He is nonattached; his action is neither sattvic, rajasic, or tamasic.

On the other hand, ordinary people can only act for reasons like duty, desire, or delusion. *BG* 3.29 calls them attached. Specifically, they are "attached to *guṇa*-related action (*guṇa karman*)" (*BG* 3.29).[34] Attachment to *guṇa karman* means doing *guṇa karman* – doing sattvic, rajasic, and/or tamasic action.

To do *guṇa karman* is to act for one's own reasons. It is to act from concern with one's own duty or *svadharma*, selfish interest in obtaining the objects of one's desires, or foolish clinging to one's peculiar delusions. It is to act as an individual, according to one's own lights.

The practitioner who transcends the *guṇa*-s is free from the limitations of individuality. He is "established in oneness" (*BG* 6.31). Recognizing that what is essential or inherent in all beings is the same (*BG* 6.29), he "sees [God] everywhere

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[33] Sargeant, *Bhagavad Gītā* 185.

[34] *BG* 3.28 explains that "the *guṇa*-s move (*vartante*) among *guṇa*-s." As I have argued, this verse only makes a claim about ordinary people. It may mean that when one acts on sattvic incitement (with knowledge that something is obligatory) it is because one possesses virtue, which is also sattvic (18.6, 30). And when one acts from rajasic incitement (perception of a desired object) it may be because one is selfish, which is a rajasic trait (14.17, 18.24). Sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic incitement may have a pull on a person by appealing to sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic qualities the person possesses.

and all things in [God]" (*BG* 6.30). This recognition engenders equanimity, the joyous embrace of all beings, and the concern that they all should thrive. The practitioner adopts Krishna's universal aim of world maintenance.

Surrendering action to Krishna

Surrendering action to Krishna, I will argue, is just the positive aspect of *nirguṇa karman*, which has been identified already. It is the adoption by the practitioner of God's ends as his own, or doing one's duty for the sake of world maintenance.

In *BG* 3.30, Krishna implores Arjuna to fight, "surrendering all actions to me" (*mayi sanyasya*). He promises Arjuna that if he does this he will be free from the bondage of rebirth (*BG* 3.31). This promise is made again in *BG* 12.6-7.

> But those who hold me as supreme,
> surrendering all actions to me,
> meditating on me,
> worship me with undistracted yoga. (*BG* 12.6)
> I soon deliver
> from the sea of death and transmigration
> those who enter into me
> in contemplation. (*BG* 12.7)

Sargeant takes surrendering one's actions to Krishna, or 'deferring actions to Krishna' as he translates it, to be allowing Krishna to initiate one's actions.[35] I reject this

[35] Sargeant, *Bhagavad Gītā* 187.

suggestion as it amounts to Arjuna's giving up his very agency when all that is asked of him is to surrender his actions.

B. K. Matilal sees Arjuna as simply letting Krishna tell him what to do. He sees this as Arjuna's only alternative given his moral dilemma. Matilal argues that the choice between two "irreconcilable alternatives" can only be based on irrational or non-moral grounds.[36] He takes Arjuna's acceptance of Krishna's directions as non-rational, which entails that Arjuna acts from simple obedience. I reject this view. It sees Arjuna as sacrificing too much intellectually. If Krishna means for the practitioner to simply obey, he would not take so much time and care to explain the role of sacrifice in world maintenance, the unity of all beings in God, and other things which help make Arjuna understand why he should do what he should do.

Furthermore, Krishna never asks Arjuna to allow God to initiate all his actions, nor does he insist on Arjuna's simple obedience. Meanwhile, he does ask Arjuna to make world maintenance his aim. In doing so, I think he indicates what form he would like Arjuna's sacrifice to him to take.

Arjuna's moral dilemma amounts to not knowing what to do to most effectively contribute to world maintenance. He is worried that fighting against his cousins will lead to the downfall of the family and consequently of society at large. This is a worry about world maintenance and how to secure it. Future practitioners will face this general problem too.

While Krishna tells Arjuna what to do in the current situation, he also tells him how in general he is to decide such questions. This counts against Sargeant's and Matilal's suggestions. Krishna says scripture should be the guide for determining one's obligations.

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[36] B. K. Matilal "Moral Dilemmas: Insights from the Indian Epics," *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata*, ed. Bimal Krishna Matilal (Delhi: Indian Association of Advanced Study in association with Motilal Banarsidass, 1989) 6.

> Therefore, scripture as your measure,
> determining what should and what should not be done,
> knowing the prescribed scriptural injunction,
> should you perform action here. (*BG* 16.24)

Of course, scripture is not always adequate. *BG* 16.24 does not indicate how one is to know what to do when the duties prescribed by scripture conflict, as in Arjuna's case at the outset of the *Gītā*. Arjuna's problem is not uncommon, but his solution to it is. He knows Krishna by acquaintance and in this relationship receives instruction from him directly. Scripture is normative, but God overrides it as the ultimate source of normativity.

The greatest promise, perhaps, of the *Gītā* is that anyone may attain a personal relationship with God. The devotee must "think solely of [God]" (*BG* 4.10), intent on him alone (*BG* 12.6). When he is able to transcend the *guṇa*-s he will know God by acquaintance. This is assured. In return for devotion, God brings the devotee near to him (*BG* 4.11, 7.23, 8.10, 9.25, 9.28, 9.34, 10.10, 11.55, 18.65-68). Along with immortality, nearness to God is the ultimate goal of yoga.

The text strongly suggests that this nearness yields direct perception of God as is granted to Arjuna in Chapter 11. This is arguably the dramatic high point of the text.

After Krishna gives Arjuna a vision of his true form, he asks Arjuna to "be [his] instrument" (*BG* 11.33). The *Gītā* suggests that when one knows God by acquaintance he will guide one in times of moral conflict as he does Arjuna. The fraternal tenor of their exchange seems to convey that God is easily accessible to his devotees and generous in giving direction, wisdom, and encouragement.

Even when he does not take human form, God, as the inner self, is with one at all times. He may speak, perhaps, through the voice of conscience. Krishna's emphasis on the yogic importance of knowing one's true self may have implications

for action beyond freeing one from desire and the fear of death. The inner self may possess innate moral wisdom. Krishna identifies God as the inner self, and calls God "the goodness of the good" (*BG* 10.36). Self-knowledge may be the route to accessing ultimate knowledge of good and bad.

Still, whether God provides the devotee with practical guidance, and if so how, is not made clear. It is left, perhaps, for the devotee to learn through experience.

Succinct definition of karma yoga

The preceding work allows me to make my definition of *karma yoga* more succinct. *Karma yoga* is the practice of doing one's duty for the sake of world maintenance as a sacrifice to God. This requires transcending the *guṇa*-s, or turning away from all reasons for action that are generated by sattvic, rajasic, or tamasic psychological features, and instead adopting God's ends as one's own, or surrendering action to God. Transcending the *guṇa*-s is equivalent to nonattachment and yields equanimity.

Karma yoga*, choice, and creativity*

Karma yoga is voluntary. Turning away from the promptings of the *guṇa*-s such as desire and one's sense of duty is done by choice and application of self-control. The ideal *yogin* does not surrender his will but chooses to make God's ends his own.

Furthermore, as these ends are broadly construed there is room for choice in how to achieve them. Krishna tells Arjuna to fight, for example, but Krishna does not

spell out each move Arjuna should make. Arjuna is free to, and will doubtless have to, exercise choice on the battlefield in many split-second decisions and more deliberate strategic maneuvers.

World maintenance in an ever-changing world implies creativity. With time comes new knowledge and new technologies. These create new opportunities for action and give rise to new moral questions. For example, what duties, if any, does a sperm donor have to children conceived using his sperm? Over time the social landscape changes, bringing new problems that require solutions and new opportunities that must be explored with discernment. For example, is it permissible for earnest Westerners to study yogic teachings which were supposed to be kept secret to all but those with commitment to a guru and formal initiation? For society to flourish, which is a goal of world maintenance, such questions need to be answered with compassion and good judgment. And that judgment is necessarily creative, for what it must produce is the right answer to a new question.

The *Gītā* leaves open the practitioner's relationship to such creativity. Arjuna was unable to resolve his moral dilemma. He was incapable of the creativity required. Yet this need not mean that all practitioners will be so incapable. As I argued in Chapter 1, it is best to take Arjuna to represent the new practitioner. The ideal *yogin* may be capable of more.

Krishna declares that he is the inner self of all living beings. This permits of a variety of interpretations as a survey of the classical commentators' works shows. Among those I discussed, Abhinavagupta takes the identity of God and individual selves to entail the heaviest correlation of qualities between God and man. Abhinavagupta argues that since God is free to create, and individual selves are identical with God, then the individual selves have God's power of creation. He goes so far as to affirm the practitioner's ability to create cities, for example, without building materials, tools, or manpower but by pure will.

There is nothing in the *Gītā* to block a view like Abhinavagupta's, though admittedly there is nothing to recommend such a view either. Yet such creativity may be possible for us. The very possibility is inspiring, tantalizing, and worrisome. With such power, would not the imperative to restrain desire be all the more important? Perhaps Krishna intends to leave the question of our creativity to be explored by those willing to ask it. He performs a miracle in revealing his true form to Arjuna so that he might know God's nature. But note that while Krishna also wishes Arjuna to know the nature of his own inner self, he does not attempt to reveal Arjuna's true form to Arjuna. He leaves that, rather, for him to discover on his own. So does he leave it to us, perhaps, to discover the extent of our creativity.

Conclusion

Summary of the main conclusions

The main questions of this dissertation are:

1. Is effort considered, in the *Gītā,* in principle possible?
2. Is action in *karma yoga* to be free of desire? If so, how can action be performed without desire?
3. How is action in *karma yoga* to be specifically characterized?
4. What does it mean to transcend the *guṇa*-s and surrender action to God?

The answer to the first question is yes. Krishna indicates voluntarism in a number of ways: implicitly recognizing that Arjuna can choose to fight or not, naming volitional opposites as his obstacles on the battlefield, seeking to convince Arjuna to fight, explicitly stating effort and self-control as required for yoga, and offering Arjuna alternative practices that he may choose from based on his ability. At the same time, Krishna's metaphysics contains no element that entails determinism. His metaphysics is not materialist and he makes no statements indicating any general view of causation. Interpreters who attribute to the *Gītā* elements of classical Sāṃkhya which entail determinism commit a fallacy of anachronism, reading the later philosophy into the text. There is no substantial theoretical indication of determinism in the *Gītā*. The few verses that do *prima facie* suggest determinism can be reinterpreted in line with the overall voluntarist tenor of the text.

On the second question, yes, action in *karma yoga* is to be free from desire. *Niṣkāma karman*, or desireless action, is without any form of desire, contrary to those

who argue that only a certain subset of desires are disallowed. The *Gītā* describes several forms of action as utterly desireless. Sattvic action is duty for duty's sake, done without desire for the results. Action done from pure compulsion is also desireless. (Compulsion and desire are distinct.) God acts without desire and for the sake of world maintenance. Many forms of action count as desireless. *Karma yoga* is one of them.

The *Gītā* does not include a theory of motivation. In answer to the question of how action can be performed without desire, I develop a theory that is consistent with the *Gītā*'s teachings. Krishna mentions briefly that he supports beings' movement by endowing them with *ojas*, or energy. I interpret this energy as serving as a motivational push that is always present but which must be coordinated with the pull of a reason to generate motivation. Krishna provides a detailed theory of reasons, or incitement. Reasons may be derivative from one's concern for duty (sattvic), one's desire (rajasic), one's delusion (tamasic), or perhaps a combination of these. To act for the sake of duty, desire, or delusion is to act on reasons generated by psychological faculties and states which belong to the *guṇa*-s, certain sets of psychological features. I argue that, contrary to many commentators and interpreters, the *guṇa*-s are not constituents of material nature which obey strict causal laws.

In answer to the third and fourth questions, I define *karma yoga* as doing one's duty as an offering to God, free from the influence of the *guṇa*-s. To transcend the *guṇa*-s is to look past one's personality and discount one's sense of duty, desires, and delusions as reasons to act. The practitioner instead adopts God's end of world maintenance. Thus he makes his actions an adequate and appropriate sacrifice to God. To do so is to surrender his actions to God. Yet, *karma yoga* is undertaken willingly.

The overarching goal is to offer a libertarian interpretation of the *Gītā*.

Closing remarks on freedom

The *Gītā* recognizes human freedom in the senses commonly recognized in Western discussions of freedom, such as having open alternatives, having been able to do otherwise, having the sources of one's actions be in oneself, and so on, as discussed in Chapter 2.

Karma yoga promises far greater freedom than this. Liberation is the ultimate freedom as the state of permanent release from all suffering. But even before this goal is reached, the practitioner experiences freedom unfamiliar to ordinary people.

Through the restraint of desire, he is less and less troubled by dissatisfaction. He learns how to be content. Failure stings less, and the ego's demand for success is relaxed. He thus feels more free to exercise creativity in his undertakings. New ways of doing things necessarily involve risk, as they have not been tried before and might not work. He more and more finds the fortitude to take such risks. He is better able to rise to occasions that require new solutions. The world stands to benefit from his innovativeness, and he may experience joy in being creative.

As he deepens in his level of self-understanding, his fear of death abates. He worries less about disease, old age, accidental harm, or being the victim of violence. He stops letting worries like these limit his behavior and his enjoyment of family, friends, and other fellow beings.

As he learns to identify with all beings through mutual identity with God, he grows in compassion and his loneliness diminishes.

Finally, even before liberation, the practitioner experiences freedom from his own finitude. As his sphere of concern grows to include the whole of creation, so does the significance of his actions. He grows in confidence that his efforts contribute to the flourishing of all living things, and even, beyond that, to God's work. He does not worry that his life is without meaning.

Through his practice the *yogin* finds freedom from the most crushing woes of the modern era: dissatisfaction, blocked creativity, loneliness, and meaninglessness. He is freed from the problems the ancients recognized as intrinsic to human life: fear, suffering, sickness, and death. His agency increases, in a sense, as desire and fear diminish and he finds himself willing to engage in a wider range of activities. Further, as his creativity grows and he comes to realize the vastness of what is possible for him. This is, I contend, the teaching of the *Gītā*.

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